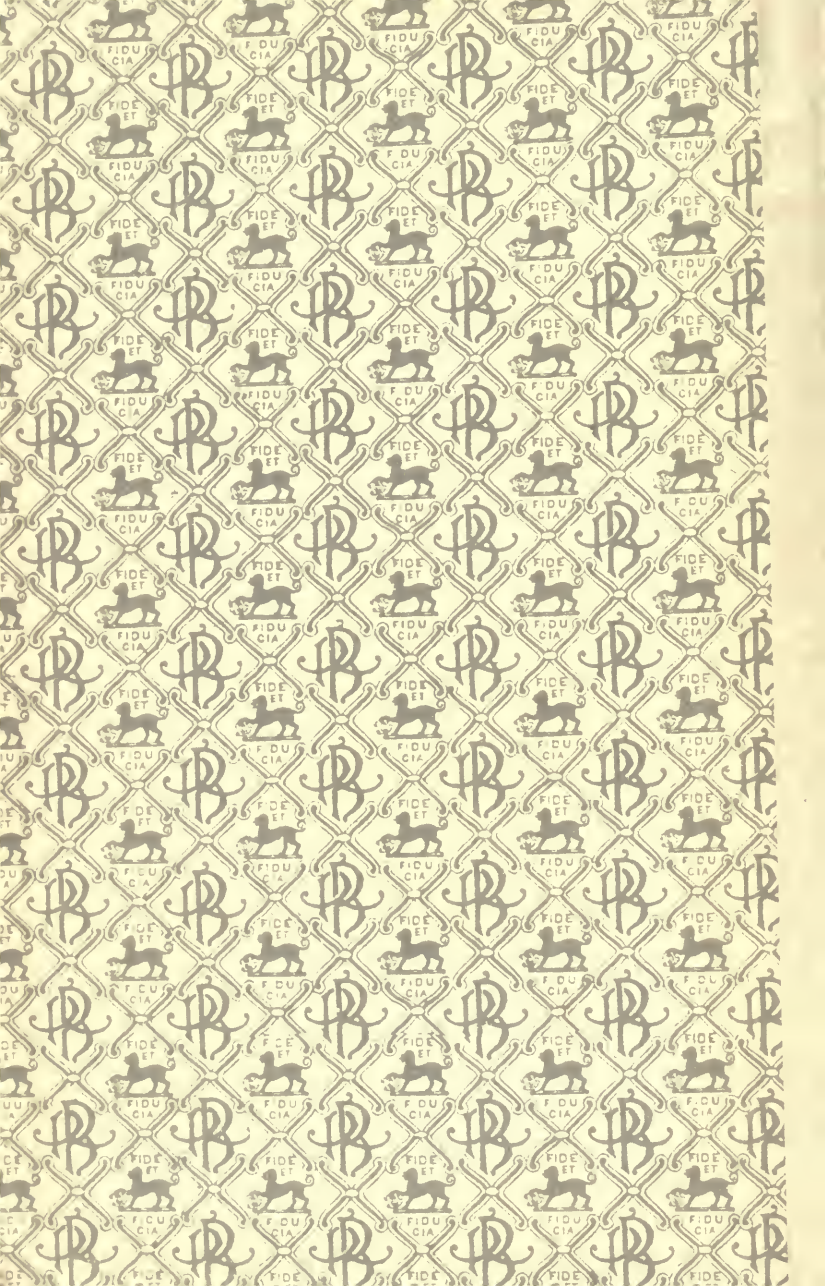
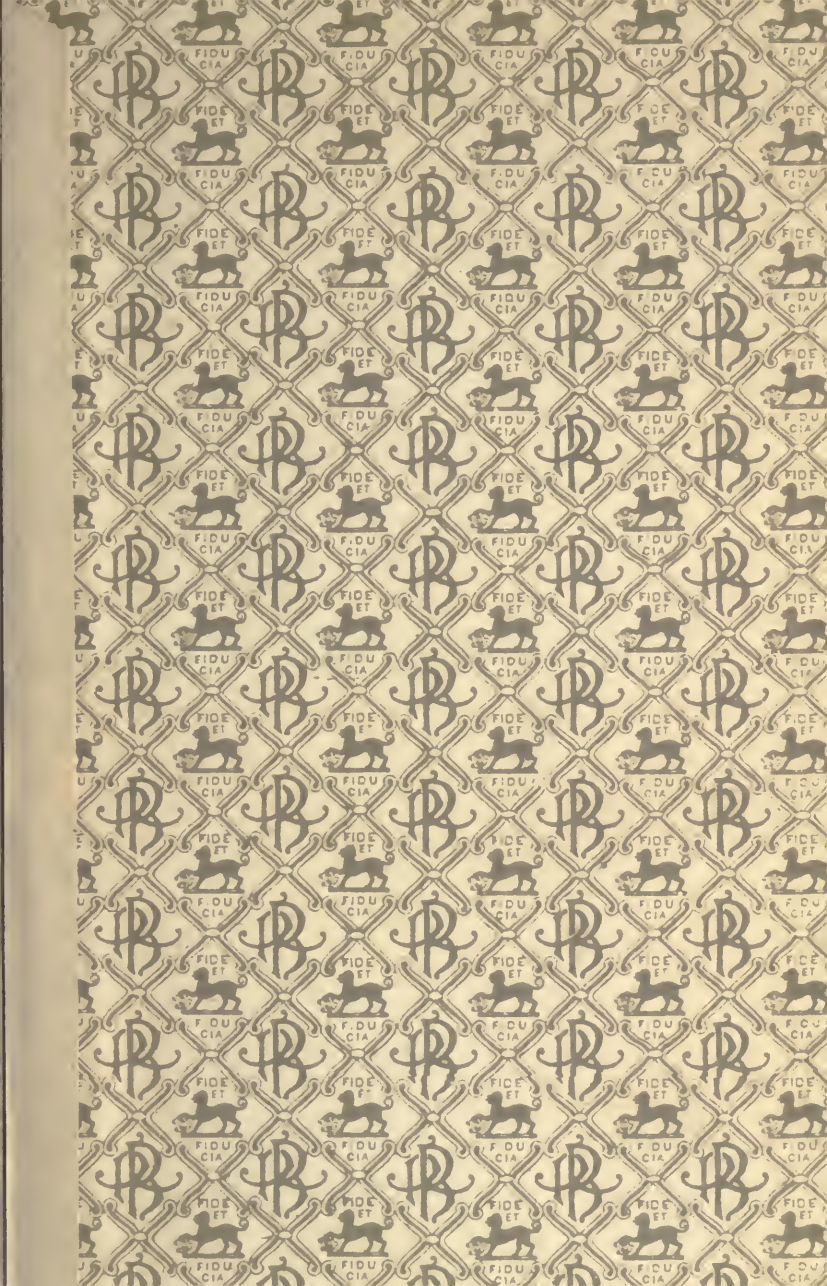








BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL

BARBARA HELM

TRIAL

A NOBEL

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'WOED AND MARRIED,' 'MARY ST. JOHN,' ETC.



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"Sing of the nature of Woman, and then the song shall be surely full of variety, odd crotchets, and most sweet closes. It shall be humorous, grave, fantastic, amorous, melancholy, brightly, one in all, and all in one."—MARSTON.

TO
MY FOUR SISTERS

WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH JOY AND SORROW
A FOURFOLD BLESSING TO MY LIFE,

This Story
IS DEDICATED



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BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

CHAPTER I.

BAB IN THE PINE-WOODS.

"Thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd with thy tongue."—SHAKESPEARE.

ONLY BAB !

Not dear Barbara, not even our Barbara, but only Bab !

Ah, that was just their way :—those Heathcotes were quiet undemonstrative people ; sugared epithets, honeyed speeches, seldom fell from their lips. As they themselves would say, still waters run deep ; and perhaps they were right.

Nor were they singular. How many and many a family live their love with a shy reticence perfectly inexplicable to other and warmer natures ; sisters, who would cling together till death, shrinking almost painfully from the simplest expression of affection, hiding love with a thousand little brusqueries, assumed or real, yet now and then under strange circumstances breaking into passionate impulses, of which you would never believe them capable.

Odd contradictions, over which one could moralise for a lifetime ; unsolvable enigmas of a gnarled and warped human nature ! And yet strangest of all is, that under this outer bark of roughness, this icy barrier of reserve, love can live on fresh and young as ever, deprived of its daily nutriment, its sweetest sap ; and yet it is so.

Bab in the pine-wood ! Oh, that pine-wood ! it is surely a slip out of Paradise—some lost corner, world-forgotten and unheeded, a subject for an idyll.

A sky dimly and deliciously blue, with great piles of clouds sleeping heavily along to westward, trailing ragged fringes of foamy light as they go ; beneath them reaches of pasture-land, full of green sunshine, and long white country roads, dotted

here and there with cottages and tangled hedgerows, rich with blackberry thickets, wild nut-trees, and the sweetbrier-rose. A little while hence and those roads will be purple with heather, and bordered with tall shadowy bracken; and even now there is no lack of colouring, for the gold of the furze is here, and the dark firwoods stretch themselves out as a dusky background, larch, spruce, and Scotch fir forming blue-black distances, cutting massively against the summer sky. One treads softly over the mouldering bracken and heather of last year's growth, sinking ankle-deep the while with delicious crisp sounds into the dry leaf-mould. What a silence and mystery in these woods!—the long aisles, with their green misty light, their perfumy stillness broken only by the wood-dove's note. Bab, in her quaint fanciful way, called them the ghosts of other woods, and always hushed her breath as she walked between their mast-like stems, while the sweet incense of the pines breathed spicily around her; but Bab has plenty of these weird sayings, and who minds them? Not that merry party who have grouped themselves so picturesquely in that steep little glade down yonder, couched snugly on the dry heather, judging from their laughing utterances and gay snatches of song. These are the Heathcotes, the family of Dr. Heathcote, until lately sole physician of the pretty little outlying hamlet of Sunningford.

People always looked at Hester Heathcote: one would notice her in a crowd, even in a ballroom, and simply because probably she would be the most beautiful woman there, or would be if she were not so pale, and her face had a little more expression in it; it is merely a fine mask, after all—too much power and reticence, a reticence that, by forbidding animation, spoils all. One would look long at her, and little at her young sister Connie, though she is a pretty fair-headed little Saxon enough; for while the one face is capable of much, did it not repress all feeling, the other is capable of very little—a light simple soul, hopelessly young, and reflected in mere prettiness.

The tall angular man, with the thin face and grey beard, is Dr. Heathcote; and the handsome gipsy by his side is his only son Leigh. Those two opposite them are mother and son; the latter Norman Strath, Dr. Heathcote's present assistant and future partner. Something in the proud independence of his manner and bearing, and the many diamond rings on Mrs. Strath's white fingers, seem to attest they have

seen better days ; if they have, Sunningford does not know it ; some people keep their own counsel for good and ill. Norman Strath has been reading aloud to them from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* ; he has left off now, and the party are discussing it with some interest. Hester goes on with her sketching, and looks a little disdainful.

"Poetry is all very well, and very pretty," she observed, "but it is apt to degenerate into mere sentimentalism. For my part, I think Enid was a tame poor-spirited wife after all ; and I have no patience with her."

"A speech worthy of Barbara," laughed Leigh. "Now for an argument : go on, Strath."

"No ; Miss Heathcote has spoken, and it is a good thing there are no young pattern wives here to listen to such heresy. I am sorry Tennyson has failed to make you comprehend his sweet conception, and the beauty of Enid's faith and obedience ; but, pardon me, the loss is yours."

"I know it," returned Hester. "I was certain of having a minority on my side in this virtuous company : even Mrs. Strath is against me."

Mrs. Strath smiled in her sad quiet way.

"You are—are you not, Mrs. Strath ?"

"My dear Hester, I simply dispute your right to argue on such matters at all. Only perfect love ensures perfect obedience : till you experience the one, you cannot practise the other. What do young things like you know of either ?"

Hester bit her lip, colouring slightly.

"We were speaking of generalities, Mrs. Strath—what your son would term abstract ideas. I hope," somewhat haughtily, "that you do not dispute my right to argue on these."

Mrs. Strath looked a little grave for the occasion—but then she was generally grave.

"My mode of expressing myself has offended you, Hester. What I meant was this :—Even to criticise, one requires knowledge, experience, and a fitting discrimination of things. To judge of Enid, you must put yourself in her place : in her century, women were mere vassals ; and were you she, and your love for Geraint as great and reverential as hers was, you would find yourself leading those three horses as meekly as ever she did, and forget your humiliation in your pain."

Hester shook her head, and compressed her lips into a "Never ;" the others laughed.

"That will do, mother," said Norman quietly. "Dr. Heath-

cote, it is time for me to ride over to Basingstoke, is it not?"

"Not for the next half-hour. Roger will be here with the horses by then. Leigh, you lazy good-for-nothing, why can't you run down to the 'Green Man,' and see if he understood my orders?"

"No, indeed. I am far more comfortable where I am. Roger will be here punctually enough. The old fogie at Basingstoke will die quite as easily without yours or Norman's assistance."

"Leigh," said his father reprovingly; but Leigh only looked incorrigible, and patted his shoulder patronisingly.

"Did it put on its professional face, then, when it hears one of its patients is going to die—as if it has not killed plenty of people before this? I say, Daddy, run up a long bill, and give me half. I am awfully short just now."

"Leigh, Leigh, as though that were any new thing."

"A thing's never the worse for being old. No, 'pon honour, as Geoffrey says, I really am serious."

"So am I—painfully so, I assure you. Hullo! what's that?—Roger before his time?"

"Roger, no; it's Barbara, by all that's good. Where has the little monkey been?"

"Nonsense, my dear Leigh; no girl could execute a whistle like that. It must be Roger."

"Done! Half-a-dozen pairs of the best kid gloves to one of your old-fashioned stocks that it is Barbara. Norman, you are witness to the Pater's bet."

"No, no," expostulated Dr. Heathcote, laughing, while Leigh took out his note-book in a business-like manner; "if that be what you have learnt at college, more shame to you—only don't teach it to your new pupil, that's all."

"Six pairs of the best four-and-sixpenny," wrote Leigh, profoundly deaf for the nonce to all things, good or bad, "to one black-corded, etc. There, sir, I hope you are satisfied; the bet, as the ancients have it—Pliny, I think, first taught the art—the bet, Monsieur, is mine."

"Leigh, Leigh!" groaned the doctor, feebly pulling at his grey moustache, for the bright-faced gipsy was to him as the apple of his eye. "Well, boys will be boys to the end of time, and I declare I thought it was Roger."

And thereupon there sauntered up to them in the midst of the green gloom a little listless figure, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and dressed as soberly as a little nun.

“Only Bab.”

She was idling along in a hoppety step peculiar to herself and Dame Trot. She had bustled up her brown dress in an old-century fashion, pulled somehow through the pocket-holes, and was striking at the slender stems of the firs with a switch she had cut off a hazel-tree, and looked from head to foot as sweet and wholesome as a nut; not for long, however, for as she drew near the party her face took petulant curves, and then you saw what a wilful little soul it was.

Was she pretty? Most certainly not. Was she attractive? To some people, and under some phases, but not by any means at all times; for Barbara was truer to herself when alone.

She sauntered up now, looking defiance.

“So you have come at last,” cried Leigh eagerly. “Do you know, Barbara, I could hear you whistling right over in the nut-copse yonder, when the rest of them thought it was Roger; and the Pater has laid a bet on it.”

“Has he?” said the doctor grimly; “you young jackanapes, do be quiet.”

“It’s just like your impudence,” returned Barbara, answering him, and not her father; “that’s the way you Cantabs throw away your money. Well, never mind; now you have won the bet, of course we shall go shares—Gyp, Partner, and Co., you know; the lightest shade of lavender for one pair, and a brown—that beautiful fawn-brown—for another; and let me see?” And here Barbara stretched out the prettiest little hands imaginable—Bab’s one beauty, and she was vain enough of it, as women are when they have a single admirable point.

“And do you mean to say,” asked Hester severely, “that it was really you whistling in the roads, Barbara? Connie, don’t laugh so absurdly;” for Connie, quiet hitherto, had woke up to sudden merriment.

“In the roads, no—by all the honour of the Heathcotes; in the copse, yes. Would you like to take a lesson, Hester? put your lips so;” and Bab puckered up her mouth in the sauciest manner, while she executed a prolonged variation.

“It is a very unladylike accomplishment,” returned she, much displeased; “Bab, I am surprised at you: what will Mrs. Strath think?”

“Whatever Mrs. Strath likes. My dear Hester, don’t look at me in that frozen manner: I declare I felt warm down in the copse, and now I am quite chilly. By the bye,” she continued,

sitting down by Leigh and taking off his straw hat to play with, "it occurs to me to give you a sisterly warning. There is such a thing as over-hackneying a given word or subject."

"Nonsense," said Hester abruptly, putting up her sketch-book.

"Ah, there you are again—it is very rude to interrupt; but do just for once give me the definition of the word 'unladylike.'"

"If you don't know it, the more shame for you, Bab," said Leigh, catching up his hat and placing it triumphantly on his curls, only to be deprived of it again. "I say, you Baby, Babchen, hand that thing here; do you want a fellow to catch cold in his head?"

"It will only cool your brains a little and do you good, and my fingers want employment. Norman or somebody, do answer my question—why should whistling be unladylike?"

"I never said it was," returned Norman, smiling. "Barbara, I did not lead the attack."

"No; men seldom do," she answered shrewdly; "you leave that for our sharp tongues—but, like the parrot, you think the more."

"Well, if I must speak, whether I like it or not," replied Norman, smiling, "I suppose it is condemned as a sin against conventionality, and left for the pastime of men and boys, though why or wherefore I am not philosopher enough to know."

"Nor I either," cried Barbara hotly. "I don't see why a woman should not use her voice as well one way as another, so that it is in harmony. Unladylike and conventional indeed! I hate the terms: mere world-wise rules for little minds that never venture out of the beaten track, or do anything original. I dispute such narrow sophism. I hold a lady can do anything, so that she does it in a ladylike manner; and I can and will whistle."

"Bravo!" cried Leigh, while her father laughed. Hester rose and walked away without a word, and Connie followed her.

"Now you've made Hester cross," exclaimed Leigh; "why did you, you pugilistic Baby?"

"Why, indeed?" asked Norman, in a meaning tone. "Why does Barbara always rub people's fur the wrong way?"

"Well, what business has she to sit and rebuke me in that cool dignified manner?" returned Barbara sharply, as

Leigh remarked, *sotto voce*, "Bab was cross, and no mistake." "Why should not I know what is ladylike or unladylike as well as she?"

"My dear Barbara," remonstrated Dr. Heathcote gently, "be generous to your sister."

"Well, I can't help it," she answered doggedly. "Hester is so provoking with her prim ways; and after all, Daddy, it is no fault of mine if I inherit your pet failing—a dislike of all humbug. There, leave off wrinkling your forehead; it is all in little ladders now. I hear Roger with the horses, and Norman must start for Basingstoke; and you have to go to Lyn's Hollow about that horrid accident case. Dear, what a world it is!—nothing but sickness and crossness in it!"

"What sort of spectacles have you on to-day, little woman?" remarked her father good-humouredly, as he got up stiffly and gave himself a shake. "Brush me down, Leigh, please; I am covered all over with half-rotten leaves. And now take Mrs. Strath home with you, children, and give her some tea; and don't treat her to too much chatter on the way. Norman and I will be home about eight."

"Very well, Daddy," answered Bab abstractedly. She and Leigh often kept up their childish habit, and called that gentlest of men "Daddy." "Mrs. Strath, if you are ready, we will walk on, while Leigh collects the things."

"Yes, always leave me to do all the work," grumbled Leigh, not raising himself from his elbow. "I wish the vassal age would come again—that I do." But for once his remonstrance was unheeded, for Barbara was already half-way through the wood, whistling deftly as she went.

CHAPTER II.

HEATHCOTE HOUSE.

"What are they? that old house of yours which gave
Such welcomes oft to me, the sunbeams fall
Still, down the squares of blue and white which pave
Its hospitable hall."

"A brave old house! a garden full of bees,
Large drooping poppies, and Queen hollyhocks
With butterflies for crowns—tree peonies,
And pinks, and goldilocks."—JEAN INGELOW.

"BARBARA," said Mrs. Strath gently, as they turned down one of the white country roads—"Barbara, how can you have the heart to vex Hester as you do?"

Bab, who had been sauntering along by the hedgerows, pulling at the young bracken and peering into every thicket in search of birds' nests, turned round with a face of conscious innocence, and, taking her companion's arm, walked along as demurely as a little brown mouse.

"My child, you are sinning against your better nature in doing so; it is not worthy of you."

"Mrs. Strath, did you ever see anything so provoking as Hester's manner?—it is enough to try a saint."

"I did not notice it, Barbara, I assure you; but if this be one of the daily disagreements of which you complain, I can only say they must proceed from your own fault, and shall soon be of Hester's opinion, that you are utterly unmanageable."

"Ah! that is just it. I won't be managed. I hate to be managed. I should like to know whose business it is to manage me unless it be Daddy's; and I cannot fancy him trying to do it. Mrs. Strath, I wonder how it ever happened for two such incongruous characters as Hester and myself to be sisters? If you were to hunt through the whole wide world, I believe you could not find two human beings more utterly dissimilar—more completely antagonistic."

"I daresay not; it often happens so in families, and the consequence is, there are often hard rubs before the different angles fit in and get rounded."

"That will never be the case with Hester and me: we only sharpen each other's angles, and make them more apparent;

and as for fitting in, bless you, there's no giving up or coming down between us."

"He maketh men to be of one mind in a house," said Mrs. Strath solemnly.

Barbara winced. She was not unaccustomed to these little "goody bits," as she called them, in Mrs. Strath's talk; but they never came sweetly to her, for Barbara was not good, and she thought these sort of speeches were not applicable to the six working days of the week, but might be more fittingly reserved for the seventh: it was so like the cant of the Methodists; and Bab hated cant.

"It would be rather difficult to make us think alike," she continued, rather sullenly. "But what is the good of talking? 'What can't be cured must be endured:' I don't know a wiser proverb than that."

"I know one that is ten times better. 'He that ruleth his spirit is greater than he who taketh a city.' Barbara, I think, if we go deep enough and probe the wound, we can find a cure better than if we gloss it over with idle complaint and ignorant self-deceit."

"What do you mean?" asked Barbara, startled; for Mrs. Strath, candid as she was, had never spoken to her quite so earnestly before.

"What I mean is, that I could lay my finger on the sore place at once, and give you the root of the whole matter, the hidden source from whence proceed all the disagreements and weary home-crosses of which you so bitterly complain. Shall I do it, Barbara?"

"Certainly; only I doubt your capacity."

"Then doubt it no more. The origin and nature of the disease is jealousy, and sorely indeed are you bitten by it."

"Mrs. Strath!"

"There, I have roused your spirit; you are angry, and justly so, at finding yourself convicted of a sin at once so mean and so despicable. But do not deceive yourself, my child; do not shelter yourself under self-complacency, it is simply jealousy."

"Go on," said Barbara. She had never been spoken to like this in all her life before, and, to do her justice, she never refused to hear the truth.

"You are jealous of Hester," continued Mrs. Strath, "jealous of her great beauty, and her power of winning friends, of the influence she maintains over all who know her. In your great hungry heart—you have a great hungry heart, Barbara,

and a thirsting one, too, poor child—you ask, ‘Why have I nothing and she everything?’ and in the bitterness of envy you see her every action with a jaundiced eye.”

“Well,” said Barbara; she could not say more for the little choke in her voice.

“I am sorry for Hester,” mused Mrs. Strath. “It is sad to see her laden with a heavy responsibility, and trying so painfully, with all her faults, to do her duty. It is hard to know that the days go on without a pleasant word and hardly a pleasant look from you, Barbara, and only the worry of contradiction and the jar of petulance to fret her really even temper.”

“You are unjust to me, Mrs. Strath, and unjust, doubly so to Hester.”

“I know she has faults,” she assented quietly; “have I not just said so? and many and grievous ones. I know she is cold in manner, and proud, and a little hard, and that the consciousness of not being understood makes her more so; but she loves you, Barbara—don’t shake your head and pretend to deny it; she is proud of you and your cleverness, and would willingly be friends if your hauteur and contradiction would allow it.”

Barbara shook her head again mournfully, and sighed.

“Think over my words, dear girl, you will find them soberness and truth; think over them on your knees, for we know best what is true there and what is false. Examine your own conscience, if the root of the disease be not envy and jealousy and all uncharitableness, and then it will rest with yourself whether you will be ‘whole of that plague.’ Have I spoken to you too plainly?”

“No,” answered Barbara; and then she added slowly and with intense effort, “no, you are right; and yet if it be as you say, the evil is deep down and entwined with my very life.”

“Think over it,” was all Mrs. Strath said, “and now let us talk of pleasanter subjects;” and she pressed the girl’s arm closer to her side, for, in spite of her reproof, she loved Barbara better than Connie or even Hester, and had spoken to her as she would have done to her own child.

“I have done my duty by her for once,” she went on musingly to herself, “as I would to any other poor motherless girl that I saw going astray; but the evil is, as I suspect, and as she says, deep down, and Hester’s manner is provoking; I am afraid till the one has tasted sorrow and the other joy, they will never amalgamate better than oil and water.”

An honest conclusion, and one to which Barbara came in

the course of their long silent walk ; for either she could not or would not talk. In her secret heart of hearts she knew Mrs. Strath was right, and that the matter was so ; but how to mend it ?—alas ! she lacked both the willingness and the power. “If Hester were to do wrong,” she said to herself, “show weakness, or even condescend to weakness, I could unbend and give her plenty of love ; but this cold, self-sufficient, putting-down manner is like a wall of ice between us, and break through it I cannot”—say will not, Barbara, that would be nearer the truth.

They were drawing near the end of their walk now, and were just approaching the outskirts of the village, which, like most other English villages, was cleanly and cheerful, with just enough of detail to make up a picturesque whole. A farm, with its deep-littered strawyard, and dappled cows standing knee-deep in shady half-dried pools, with here and there a brood of yellow ducklings ; a green sunshiny field, a few young lambs frisking about their blackfaced mothers, a blind old horse under a tree, and a shepherd’s dog propped against the horse-trough, snapping at flies with his gaping mouth ; an orchard full of delicious shadows and beehives, odd scraps and ends of beauty for an artistic eye to seize upon, and perhaps to reproduce. Then the long straggling street of the village, grass-grown and shady with trees ; the cottages with their small latticed windows and whitewashed fronts, perfectly embowered in roses in summer time, their gardens gay with bright homely flowers, lupins and stocks, borders of London pride, and great bunches of southernwood. Then the inn, with three large elm-trees encircled with benches ; the wheelwright and the stonemason’s yard, the Methodist chapel, and the little all-sort shops, before which the barefooted urchins rolled their alley-tors on the side-paths, and brown-faced babies sunned themselves about the low stone steps in company with a half-starved cur. A cleanly, pretty little village on the whole, with quaint old-fashioned ways of its own, where even the day-labourer touched his cap, and the children grinned and curtsied, or pulled their sandy forelocks to the doctor’s daughter as she passed. Then up a sunny little hill, past the old Norman church with its great square tower, and the new schoolhouse ; past the parsonage, with its trim lawns and shrubberies, and the low white cottage where Mrs. Strath lived, down a steep grassy lane, and in at a green door in the wall, with Dr. Heathcote’s name inscribed on a brass plate.

A great sunny red-brick house was Dr. Heathcote's, half covered with ivy, which clambered about the old walls, not trimly and decently trained but hanging over many a window in ragged festoons, till some hand, impatient of light and air, had torn it from its resting-place, where it hung down in bowery lengths like green serpents uncoiled, or what Barbara called picturesque confusion. She was admiring it now, as she and Mrs. Strath entered the dimly-lighted hall, which even on the hottest summer day was like a patch of cool delicious shadow, where one might sit looking through the open door on to the green sunshiny wilderness beyond. It was furnished pleasantly too, though with more regard to comfort than taste. The summer matting, and couches covered with Turkish-looking chintz, the oddly-shaped tables with fern-cases and aquariums, made it more like a dwelling-room. The plot of ground before the house was laid out in trimly-cut beds, and crowded with old-fashioned flowers, pansies, convulvi and sweet-williams, Turk's caps, and beds of tall white lilies, hollyhocks, and blazing sunflowers. But behind the house, and stretching far away, lay another beautiful garden. There were flowers and beehives and sweet-scented shrubs in the front, but here there were none : it was like a glade in a forest and nothing else. A great narrow lawn—narrow as regards its size—but immensely long, green, and soft as velvet, and shaded on either side by tall forest trees. Some one who loved arboriculture must have planted those trees, they were so varied and beautiful—elms, acacia, and silvery birch, rowans, and sycamores and horse-chestnuts, with patches of firs and larches, aspens, and tall dark junipers, and many others. Half-way up the lawn, under a large elm-tree, was a pretty little summer-house covered with Virginian creepers, which crept in at the latticed windows and open door and festooned the roof ; here Barbara, with one silent companion, sat reading or dreaming through many a summer's noon. This lawn formed the whole of the garden, with the exception of a narrow winding walk, planted with laurel and dark with yews, which led right round it to a little sunny kitchen-garden at one side. To Barbara the whole was but a Paradise of delight. All her life long, even when she was in other and far grander scenes, her affection clung tenaciously to the old garden, and she firmly declared she never had seen and never should see anything more beautiful.

There was nothing very striking as regards the house itself, except perhaps its age ; a queer, rambling, shambling old place,

full of low oak-ceiled rooms and labyrinthian out-of-the-way passages. There had been an effort made to modernise one or two of the sitting-rooms, which had failed signally. True, the panelling had been replaced with handsome papers, and the narrow window-frames filled with plate-glass; but they could not get rid of the lowness and narrowness; and strange to say, these rooms were the most uncomfortable of all, though Hester had fitted up the window-seats with cushions of her own and Connie's working, and had coaxed her father to frame Barbara's crayon drawings just to give a little life and colouring—improvements at which Bab had inwardly groaned, and outwardly pulled a very long face, terming Hester's efforts useless innovations, and then had fled up the staircase and taken refuge in her own den, from the vanities and vagaries, as she assured herself, of this wicked world. This den, or, as Barbara called it, "my suite of apartments," was another bone of contention between the sisters, Hester declaring it was a great waste of labour and extravagance of fuel to keep fires up in that pokey little place, when there were three or four sitting-rooms downstairs waiting to be used, and wishing her father would not encourage her in these outlandish and unsociable habits; and Barbara, on her side, retorting that she would sit and freeze, if Hester was so good as to wish it, and had a desire to get rid of her by any slow and inflammatory means, and then fiercely blazing up, declared she would have her den if she pleased, or twenty of them, if Hester were to talk for a twelvemonth—asserting her independence in a way more bristling than agreeable. And it was to her den she repaired on this afternoon in question, after having deposited Mrs. Strath in the large cheerful apartment which Hester and Connie shared in common; as Leigh termed it, or as she truly observed, her boudoir or sulking-place. The large narrow gallery, with its tall oak presses and many windows, was rather a pleasanter place in summer than in winter time; but in both seasons of the year Barbara generally passed over it as quickly as she could, it being specially presided over by the goddess of the broom, who made it a receptacle or general airing-place for household linen and slips of carpet, Hester being, like most other young housekeepers, somewhat fussy in domestic matters, and a great advocate of Barbara's abhorrence, a spring cleaning—"as if a house ought not to be always clean the whole year round," Barbara would assert indignantly. "If I ever have a house of my own, no one shall know a domestic detail in it except myself, and everything shall

be done like magic in the early morning," a piece of novel domestic economy to which Hester would invariably reply in the same calmly scornful tone, "When you have, Barbara, I will certainly come to you to take lessons," that meaningly uttered "when" provoking Barbara excessively.

On one side of the landing-place was a long winding passage, with the servants' rooms on each side and a red-baized door at the end. As Barbara pushed this slowly open, a narrow steep little staircase came to view, with a door above, which being likewise opened, led down a high step, and right into the centre of Bab's den. Just as she was about to throw off her hat, a great scratching and scrambling was heard in the passage below; and as Bab looked down the staircase, the baized door was jerked back an inch or two, and a black nose protruded itself, then a curly paw, and lastly the noble head of a huge Newfoundland, who came lumbering and tumbling up three steps at a time, and raced with a joyous bark into the middle of the room, where he began scratching and nosing at an old tiger-skin with a delighted air of proprietorship, preparatory to lying down. This was Ben, the second inhabitant of Barbara's den.

Many months ago Norman Strath, not approving of Barbara's long solitary walks, had asked her whether she would like a dog for companionship and perhaps protection, and on Bab's answering carelessly, "Yes; anything but a black-and-tan terrier or a half-dressed poodle," he had brought her Ben. When Bab saw the great solemn Newfoundland, with his beautiful trusty face and handsome coat—black, with great splashes of curly white,—as he quietly walked round and inspected her, she gave a little cry of delight, and sitting on the doorstep, there and then she put her arms round the dog's neck and looked into his eyes—"Will you be my friend, Ben? Will you love me, and take care of me?" And if ever dog's face spoke, Ben's answered "Yes." And so Bab had got a companion. Wherever she went Ben went too. From the first day he took up his quarters in the little outer room, sleeping at night on his tiger-skin at her door, and lying at her feet for hours together, with his nose in her lap, as she sat on her little low stool reading; and when his wandering instinct tempted him abroad, and his doggish patience could be proof no longer against summer sun and breezy air, he would tap her arm with his paw gently, looking up in her face the while, as much as to say, "It is too fine to be reading here, little mistress; come out into the woods and fields." And nine times out of ten Barbara would listen to him and go.

And what a snug little den it was ! quite a "cubby-house," as the children say.

Through the half-opened doors one could catch glimpses of a dainty little bower beyond, looking as cool and fresh as white draperies and hangings could make it ; for, in spite of Hester's strictures on cleanliness and neatness, Barbara was a tidy little lady in her way, and loved to have everything ship-shape and orderly about her, and, with all her inconsistencies, had a thorough estimate of the fitness of things. Barbara was not exactly pious ; religion was to her only a theory—one that it was curious and interesting to work out on Sundays, but had nothing whatever to do with the government of her daily life. If she had been asked if she said her prayers every night, she would have answered in a shocked voice, "Yes," lifting up her very eyebrows in Pharisaical surprise. Yet when Mrs. Strath bade her think out her troubles on her knees, Bab winced in a terrified way, and in her inmost heart sneered at her for bringing such Methodistical cant into conversation. "And she pretending to be such a thorough church woman, and wanting daily services and all that sort of thing. One would think she had attended chapel all her life. Why can't people be consistent, I should like to know, and keep sermons for pulpits ? I suppose, because women may not speak in churches—at least St. Paul tells them they must not,—and Mrs. Strath does not like to hold her tongue ; but it is not a bit 'ladylike,' as Hester is always saying." And so the critical little sinner went on lulling her conscience to sleep with drugged sophistries, and quite unconscious that Mrs. Strath saw to the bottom of her narrow heart, and that she yearned over her as if she were the only lost sheep that had gone astray on her own wilful paths.

No, Bab was not a bit good ; but she had her theoretical notions of religion, and practised them in her own vague way. She would read nothing but the heaviest doctrinal books on Sunday, and invariably go to sleep over them ; and she would have no pictures in her sleeping-room that were not strictly of a sacred character, and such as to promote devotional feelings, with what meaning or result Bab best knew herself.

So great plaster angels, trailing their white robes about their feet, smiled stonily placid from the walls, or leaned on harmless swords over the little tent-bed, while above the mantel-piece was a beautiful print of the "Last Supper," by Leonardo da Vinci, and an "Ecce Homo" beneath it, guarded on either

side by a "Mater Dolorosa" and a "Magdalene;" and, lest this should not be suggestive enough, there was a little stand of devotional books, with *Thomas à Kempis* and *Taylor's Holy Living* at the top, all very carefully dusted every morning, if nothing else.

There was no hypocrisy in this. Barbara was only acting up to her theoretical notions, and was quite horrified at Connie, who strewed novels and every kind of rubbish about her room, and who never read or listened to a sermon in her life, if she could help it. But it was the little den that was Bab's real "cubby-house." Everything that was odd, cracked, or original in the house was begged, borrowed, or smuggled into that queer oblong room which was Bab's world. It really was a wonder how her clever fingers turned and twisted the shabby materials so as to produce such a picturesque effect and such a comfortable whole.

The faded carpet was hidden under a crimson drugget; the rickety old table—their nursery-table it was—covered with a handsome braided cloth; the ugly small-paned windows half concealed by new muslin curtains that Bab had bought with her last quarter's money, much to Hester's indignation.

There was a rocking-chair, an old-fashioned gentleman's escritoire, and an easel, a carved what-not on its last legs, propped by main force against the wall, and laden with all manner of curiosities in cracked china, superannuated vases, and silver-lined shells, two or three birds of Paradise, and a little beathen god, sitting cross-legged and smiling fiendishly. But to enumerate all Barbara's treasures were impossible: they were of all sorts and sizes, from a Swiss cuckoo-clock down to a nodding mandarin.

There were plaster busts and figures here likewise, but of a strictly mythological character. A large lumbering old sofa, with its dull moreen covering all darkened and stained with ink, which had been in their schoolroom for a long time, and was so comfortable, stood just in a nice recess, and Leigh liked to lie on it; but how to improve its dinginess was beyond even her resources. But one day she remembered an heirloom, one of the few that had come down to her—an Indian scarf, a most brilliant specimen of needlework; it was useless for anything but acting charades. Bab fingered it long, and then, quick as thought, wound it carefully over and round the old schoolroom sofa, till it stood out now in a blaze of Oriental glory, with its golden embossed flowers and scarlet embroidery. Barbara was

so elated with her own genius that she had up Hester to look at it; but after the first surprised exclamation Hester only remarked: "Are you mad, Barbara? Where have you learnt all this sinful extravagance?" After which uncalled-for censure, Bab never invited her up into her snuggery again; but Leigh came often, and stayed long, trailing his lazy length on the Oriental couch, and maintaining all the while that it was "awfully jolly, and no end snug;" and Barbara agreed with him.

CHAPTER III.

HESTER.

"And did she love him?—what if she did not?
Then home was still the home of happiest years;
Nor thought was exiled to partake his lot,
Nor heart lost courage through foreboding fears;
Nor echo did against her secret plot,
Nor music her betray to painful tears;
Nor life become a dream, and sunshine dim,
And riches poverty because of him.

"But did she love him?—what and if she did?
Love cannot cool the burning Austral sand,
Nor show the secret waters that lie hid
In arid valleys of that desert land.
Love has no spells can scorching winds forbid,
Or bring the help which tarries near to hand,
Or spread a cloud for curtaining faded eyes
That gaze up, dying, into alien skies."

JEAN INGELOW.

THAT was a strange remark that Barbara made to Mrs. Strath during their homeward walk about herself and Hester—strange, yet profoundly true—"If you hunt through the whole wide world, you cannot find two human beings so utterly dissimilar, so completely antagonistic;" and Mrs. Strath felt she was right. They were dissimilar—for sisters, strikingly so; but Hester's character is one that must bear a little psychological inquiry to be comprehended even imperfectly, its most distinctive traits being subtle and least strongly marked. The secret of Hester's character—of Hester's life—was a love of power; this was the basis, the real motive of her actions, her one ruling passion; yet so strongly was it hidden by her many virtues that it was

invisible even to herself. If questioned by her own conscience, she would have replied her motives were twofold—to do her duty, and to win love: to do her justice, duty always came first in Hester's reckoning.

She was so very upright, so single-souled in her integrity, so candid even in her reticence; in her the will and the power to work were so evenly balanced and judiciously exercised, that perhaps in all the village of Sunningford there was not a woman more useful, more respected, or more generally beloved than Hester Heathcote. In her father's house and in the meanest cottage she reigned supreme, rejoicing in a power that was due to her strong consistent character, and won by her quiet acts of benevolence more than even by her great beauty; and perhaps the most striking trait in Hester's character was her unconsciousness of her personal attractions. She knew she was beautiful—what woman would not? and the knowledge was pleasant to her; but her pride was too great to include vanity, and it was by this very unconsciousness that she doubled her power. And yet another thing; she disdained the appliances of dress, rejecting anything like ostentation or extravagance, and refusing to lend herself to what she called a feminine weakness; and though no one would have better repaid a little care and cost, she always dressed herself in the simplest and soberest manner, and insisted on her sisters following her example, and looking like what they were—a country doctor's daughters: and in this matter Connie was the only rebellious one; for Barbara, distrustful of herself and her power of pleasing, went habited like a little nun. It was this lack of vanity, this utter simplicity, that made Hester so inexplicable to the one set, and so admirable to the other. Girls of her own age could not understand her, and rarely liked her. The quiet coolness of her manner daunted them; the way in which she held herself aloof from their little pleasures and gossips awed and repulsed them. "Miss Heathcote might be a very superior person," they said, "but she was a very disagreeable one, and, with all her haughty superciliousness, was a consummate flirt, though she did try to hide it with her church-goings and visitings; and what men could see in such a dowdily-dressed girl that they must all be foolish about her, old and married men as well as young and eligible ones, except that she had fine eyes and a good figure, was beyond their comprehension—as though hers was the only pretty face to be found in Sunningford."

These were the remarks of the giddy and envious. It is

strange how women manage to detract from the merits of one of their own sex when much admired by men, and yet it holds good on the other side ; men often sneer at a girl whom women admire. "That your idea of an interesting-looking woman, my dear ; why, I never saw such an insipid-looking face in my life. Amiable, pleasing ?—stuff ! not a bit of it ! She dresses well, and has modest manners ; but don't introduce me, that's all : she hasn't a thing to say for herself." And that cutting censure on one whom perhaps may be sweetness and love itself. Barbara once said in her queer way : "If I were a man—and I wish I were—and were looking out for a wife, I would not hazard my own choice, for fear I should be won by a pretty face or a merely pleasing exterior ; but I would look out for a woman who was most highly praised by her own sex, and choose her."

"Do it then with your eyes shut, Bab," retorted Leigh lazily, "for she is sure to be old and ugly. Don't the women pick holes in one of their own sex who has more than a fair share of good looks ? You must think of some other mode of choosing—this would be a failure ;" and perhaps in some instances Leigh was right.

For no one for ten miles round Sunningford would have recommended Hester Heathcote, except a few married women, who, being above jealousy, were free to admire Hester's housewifely skill and prudent ways, and who, therefore, quietly agreed with their husbands that he would be a happy man who secured her, though they generally added that it was a pity that, with her head and heart, she should fix on a man so beneath her in every way as Sir Geoffrey Hunsden ; though, of course, for a doctor's daughter to marry a baronet was a wonderful rise in life. Still they "did not think that dear Hester was one to care over much for rank, especially as good nature was all that Sir Geoffrey possessed ; and, with his great soft head, he was a hundred times more fitted for that silly little Connie."

And so folks talked, and so Barbara believed ; and it was this one weakness, this one inconsistency in Hester's character, that turned Bab's furious little heart, and bade fair to alienate all her esteem for her sister. For she saw that Hester meant to marry a man whom she could not and would not love ; and this was a heinous crime in Bab's eyes, and she despised her for it ; and Hester, so proudly reticent, felt Bab's scorn and winced at it, repaying it, not with a generous confidence, but with an

increased hauteur and silence, hiding yet more carefully her poor wounded heart.

For Hester had a secret—a deep and pitiable one, if Barbara had only known it; but, strong in her power of concealment, she had hid her sufferings jealously from every eye, fearing especially Barbara's sharp scrutiny and satire. In this she wronged her.

It was some years ago, when Hester was in her first bloom, Barbara at school, and Connie far too young to notice much that went on around her, there came to the village of Sunningford an Indian officer on sick leave, who put up at the little rustic inn.

Severely invalided, and almost friendless in England, he came down to the old place he had known and liked as a boy, and in a few days' time placed himself under Dr. Heathcote's care.

It was one of the good doctor's peculiarities to make friends with his patients, and benefit their minds, if possible, as well as their bodies. By this means he had a goodly proportion of other people's joys and sorrows laid on his shoulders; and as he not unfrequently relieved many who needed it in a pecuniary way, besides giving his time and services gratuitously, he did not find his profession quite so lucrative as he might have done, and was often taken to task by his eldest daughter on the duty of charity beginning at home. He soon found out, therefore, in his kindly searching way, that the officer was friendless—lonely, and sad, as well as sick; and with all the generosity of his humane heart, he opened his home to the wayfarer, compelling him to share his hospitality in no ordinary way. And so, day by day, and hour by hour, Hester and Captain Mayhew were thrown together; and Hester, in the benevolence of her heart, ministered to his sick wants, amused and cheered him, much as an affectionate sister might have done, till her fair face became a necessity to him, and he forgot everything in the world but her. But the awakening came, all too soon. Summer and autumn had passed away, and with the new year he must return to his post; and when the snows of Christmas came, he was suddenly startled to a sense that they must part soon.

Arthur Mayhew was not a young man; he looked older even than his age, and his hair was ploughed with grey; but it was not often given to men to see the like of his good earnest face, the outward stamp of a noble and selfless nature. They must not part, for he loved her; that was his only thought when the recall came even more hastily than he had feared; he

loved her, and he was sure she loved him, and she must come with him and be his wife. He spoke out suddenly and passionately. He was too hasty and proud, he remembered afterwards when it was too late: it was too much for her; she shrank back from the suddenness, from his changed manner, his impulsive words; she had no time to question her own heart, to know that it was beating even now with a love which she had never felt before, and which was as strong as her own nature; she was afraid of him—afraid of the new unknown life which he offered her; it was all impossible and untrue. "What! leave my home, my parents, my free happy life—all the love and power I have now, and shall win—to follow this stranger, whom I do not know that I love, to the world's end—to that terrible India which I dread—to lead a life of hardship and care? I cannot, I cannot; you ask too much, Captain Mayhew."

In some such language, hasty and hard, she answered him; and he—why are men such fools?—he believed her. Arthur Mayhew was not young, as I have said before; he had lived a life calculated to age any man. He had great knowledge of human nature, great discernment, but he had no experience of women. When he looked down at the shrinking girl before him—at her pale startled face, and heard her terrified words, he thought he was mistaken—that she did not love him; selfish and infatuated as he was, to doom a girl of nineteen to his hard wandering life!

"I have made a mistake, Hester," he said sadly, as he took her hand. "You do not care for me, dear—you cannot; I am old and grey, and you are only a young girl. There, do not tremble; I am going. I will never trouble you more."

So he spoke, the perfect gentleman—the brave soldier; and yet, oh fool! could he not see that her heart was beating with an agony she could not understand? She wanted to speak to him, to bid him stay, to wait for her, to give her time to get over her terror and weigh the sacrifice that, rising up so suddenly before her, seemed to crush her—and he was going.

She raised her eyes, and looked at him through the tears that nearly blinded her, but the calm steadfastness of his bearing daunted her. Did he really love her? Why did he not take her in his arms and soothe this anguish of conflicting feeling? "Oh, forgive me," cried the poor child, and then could say no more.

"I have nothing to forgive," he answered. "God love you

Hester, for I may not. Farewell." And then he stooped and kissed her on the forehead and went.

She could not believe it. She felt confused—in a nightmare. Was he really going? No, he could not be so cruel. She loved him—yes, she was sure she loved him. Hark! was not that the closing of the hall-door? "Captain Mayhew! Arthur! Arthur!" she cried, and her voice rang quite hoarsely through the open window. He did not hear it; only, as he passed, he lifted his hat to her with a sweet sad smile, and she never saw the face of Arthur Mayhew again.

Ah, then, indeed, lost in the depths of her despair, Hester found out too late that she loved him—that she would give all she possessed to have the right to follow him through the world, and then, in the inexperience and innocence of her heart, she did—what burned her cheek long afterwards to think of—she wrote him a letter, and in a few maidenly words told him that she loved him, and prayed for his forgiveness. Alas! that letter never reached him; after wandering far and wide, it came back to her unopened, to be crushed and torn into atoms with passionate tears. Ah, those were wretched days with Hester; but there were sadder ones to come, for six months after he reached Calcutta news came that Arthur Mayhew was dead; he had fallen a prey to a deadly fever, which in his still weak state had seized upon him, and one of the most loving natures the world had ever known had gone to its rest.

Hester made no moan when she heard these tidings, neither then nor afterwards, though they had the bitterness of death for her: it was not the manner of the Heathcotes to make loud complaint. She drooped and saddened a little, her young face grew colourless and pinched; but she was nursing her dying mother just at that time, and people attributed it to fatigue and grief.

But when Bab returned from school, she thought her sister changed and ailing; she had a cold, and it was neglected and got worse. Dr. Heathcote grew anxious: something was amiss with their girl, the flower of their flock. Something was amiss, indeed; but, during the long and tedious illness that followed, little Bab nursed her with a tenderness and care that surprised them all.

During the weary convalescence that ensued, it would have been well for them both if Hester had confided her secret to her young sister; it would have won Barbara's frank sympathy, and made them friends for life; but Hester was too proud, and

so, with all her shrewdness, Barbara discovered nothing. True, Hester turned her face to the wall a good deal and wept many sore salt tears, and her face for a long time wore a white pining look that no bodily illness could call forth ; but Barbara attributed it to the depression of weakness, and only redoubled her efforts to cheer and amuse her.

And so Hester kept her secret bravely, but it hardened her ; she had more religion than Barbara, but it failed at this time to bring her peace. When the first outburst of rebellion and despair had passed, she wearied her soul with the bare dry argument of grief. What had she done that she was to be blighted for life in the first bloom of her youth ? How had she deserved so hard a fate, who had always done her duty ? Well, happiness was over for her ; she should never love again—never ! Her heart was buried in Arthur's grave, and so on. Pshaw ! Who can repeat all the balderdash of a sick girl's fancy ; how many and many a child-woman has said the same passionate words as she tramples the earth over the open grave of a first love, and turns from it perhaps a little seared and hardened, a little of the sweet freshness gone, to go over it all again, sometimes for joy and sometimes for sorrow.

But Hester's girl-nature was a strong one, and it seared and hardened her indeed ; henceforth she would live for duty, for power, but not for love. She would take her dead mother's place, and be her father's friend ; she would cherish her beloved Connie, and bear and forbear with Barbara ; she would make her young brother happy ; and then as time went on, healing her wound and increasing her sense of influence, her ambition took a wider range. There was no wife at the Parsonage : she would be the vicar's right hand : she would assume the duties and responsibilities, be first at the mothers' meetings, preside over the schools and weekly clubs, and be the lady paramount of the parish : no one should be so respected as Miss Heathcote ; no one so admired and beloved. Ah, there was some happiness coming to her : she had found her right place at last.

But she must not always be Miss Heathcote. If Hester had one lurking feminine weakness, it was a horror of old maids. It was all very well to remain as she was while she was young and blooming, but it was not good for a woman always to be unmarried,—St. Paul never went as far as that ; so she must take the usual lot, and marry when the time came and it was no longer prudent to be single. Though she could not love again, she would take her chance and Sir Geoffrey Hunsden together.

And of all people in the world Sir Geoffrey Hunsden was the last man Hester ought to have married. As Barbara said, it was an affront to her understanding, for what affinity could there be between that strong lofty woman and the easy-tempered fox-hunting young baronet ?

To be appreciated Sir Geoffrey ought to have been born in the last century ; the times were too advanced and intellectual for him. Nature had formed him for a ploughman, or, better still, a navvy. That vast Herculean frame ought to have been clad in fustian ; it would have set off well the great massive head, with its curling hair, and the florid good-humoured face. No one would have supposed from his rough uncouth manners that he was the descendant of a long line of courtly ancestors, and the present lord of the manor.

And yet, to do him justice, the country would have been the worse without Sir Geoffrey. He was a good landlord, patient and painstaking with his tenants, hospitable and free among his equals, and wholly without vice. He neither drank, betted, nor gamed ; and though he had little interest and affection beyond his horses and dogs, he was a good dutiful son, and devoted the little time he could snatch from his favourite pursuits to his mother's will and pleasure.

Had she been a gentlewoman, her influence must have improved him ; but she was not one either by birth or education, for Sir Geoffrey's father, having impoverished his estate, retrieved his fallen fortunes by a marriage, or *mésalliance* as his relatives called it, with the only daughter and heiress of a rich London alderman ; and though Lady Hunsden tried to raise herself to his rank, she somehow failed signally in winning either his affection or respect, so after some years she resigned herself to her position, and degenerated into a meek fussy little woman, whose heart was better than her head.

Sir Geoffrey, in his rough way, was very loving and subservient to his mother ; therefore, when she pointed out to him the necessity of his taking a wife, as his father had done before him, Geoffrey, though not a marrying man, and, if the truth must be told, singularly adverse to entering into a bond that must curtail, in some degree, his freedom and love of sport, still followed obediently Lady Hunsden's request, and fixed upon Hester, assisted to the choice by his mother's judicious praise and Hester's quiet flattery. He was no more in love than she was when he came to lay his rank and fortune at her feet ; but he admired her hugely, and feared her not a little. "She was such

an awfully fine woman," he would exclaim in his simple way. "Jove! what a figure she had! and how well she would look on horseback!—your tall slim women always look well in a habit; and then, as Lady H. says"—he generally called his mother Lady H.—"she would look splendid at the head of my table, in the Hunsden diamonds;" and, fired by this last thought, he went down to Dr. Heathcote's with his proposal, couching it in language rather honest than flattering, and with a broad simplicity at which any other woman would have smiled.

Hester did not smile, but she grew pale and rather grave. Arthur Mayhew's earnest face, with all its manly pleading, rose up before her, and with that memory it was no wonder that Sir Geoffrey's foolish blunders escaped her. To do Hester justice, it was no thought of the Hunsden diamonds, or of the wealth and stately equipage that would be hers, that moved her to make this singular choice; but she thought that, as Sir Geoffrey's wife, she could indulge to the full her thirst for power, and no past Lady Hunsden, however nobly born and gifted, should rival her influence or the good that she would do.

But Sir Geoffrey waited her answer, and it came now—a strange answer, made with a firmness and decision that knew of no appeal.

She was flattered by the proposal, but she did not wish to marry yet, she could not leave her father and her home; and, as she said this, something between a sob and a sigh rose up to choke her; no, she would not marry yet: in two years' time, if Sir Geoffrey were of the same mind, he might ask her again, and she would not say him nay; he would find her ready.

Sir Geoffrey, made rather ardent by the delay, blurted out entreaties, but in vain; and when that strange interview ended, it left them both free and yet fettered, with the understanding that it was not an engagement.

It was over: Hester breathed freely, and was triumphant; and when Sir Geoffrey came to put two and two together, even he was satisfied he should have his freedom for two years longer; and when that time was expired, he would find a Lady Hunsden to his hand, without the trouble and fuss of courting—a proceeding he very much dreaded.

And so Sir Geoffrey was happy, and his mother too; and it never entered into their foolish heads that, before the two years were over, he might find some one whom even he could love better than his stately Hester, who rather awed and repulsed him—some tender young thing, whose weakness might excite

his compassion, and for whom his love might be called forth by his very desire to protect, and then find him bound.

So matters were arranged some nine months previously, and since then Bab's indignant little heart had risen up in scorn against her sister, and there was not that unity of feeling which promotes peace.

And yet there were times when Bab yearned sorely for it, when she felt lonely and sad ; it grieved her to see the perfect understanding, the mutual tenderness, between Hester and Connie, from which she was kept aloof.

Hester was now seven-and-twenty, and Connie ten years younger ; it was no wonder that Hester loved the little fair girl of seventeen, to whom she had acted a mother's part ; that she grew to cherish her as something very precious, her one ewe-lamb, while Connie clung to her in return.

Never demonstrative to others, Hester was rarely so even to Connie ; but when she took the low stool at her feet, and laid her head against her knee, Hester would stop her work to smooth the pretty yellow curls, and Barbara could see such a look of fondness break over her face that startled even her.

Nay, for her young sister, Hester would even relax her judicious management, and Connie had a sad idle time of it : she would read history, and practise a little in the morning, just as a pretence ; but the rest of the day she would be dancing in and out of the house in her broad-brimmed hat, working among her flowers and beehives, or chatting to her father and Norman in the surgery. Barbara chid her frequently and severely, but she always got the worst of it, as Hester invariably took her part ; to her, Connie's sillinesses were only beauties. "Leave her alone, Barbara," she would say ; "she is only a child : it is time enough to preach wisdom when you practise it yourself."

CHAPTER IV.

LEIGH.

"Call it a heart, and call it strong
As upward stroke of eagle's wing;
Then call it weak, you shall not wrong
The beating thing,

Still youthful mankind, fresh and keen
At danger gazed with awed delight,
As if sea would not drown, I ween,
Nor serpent bite."

JEAN INGELOW.

"A PENNY for your thoughts, Bab."

Bab shook her head slowly.

"Three-halfpence, twopence, twopence-halfpenny. Come, it is not everybody that would offer such a handsome price; but I always was a generous fellow. Come, make a clean breast; you have been a regular Brownie for the last half-hour."

Bab did look somewhat uncanny: in the fast-gathering twilight, one could see nothing but a brown bundle and two bright specks of eyes, for all the world like a captured mouse. There was something gruesome and unfit in her attitude, woe-begone and altogether graceless; a pucker of arms, knees, and chin, of eyebrows wrinkling up into low masses of hair, as she rocked herself to and fro on her stool.

"'Little Dame Muffet, she sat on a tuffet, eating of curds and whey,'" continued Leigh provokingly. "The simile, which I hope you admire, holds good save in one point: in your case the milk of human kindness has turned sour, and, instead of sweet whey, you seem chewing the cud of decidedly acid wisdom."

She laughed—who could help it?—and then frowned herself into sadness again.

"I was thinking," she said quite seriously,—“I was thinking that, waking or sleeping, working or playing, there never was such a good-for-nothing as Leigh Heathcote, a regular ‘Tauge-nichts,’ as the Germans have it.”

Leigh opened his large eyes and stared through the darkness, too astonished to speak.

"Yes, I can feel them," nodded Barbara, "great beautiful eyes, that will never light you to your true destiny, but will

keep dancing after some 'will o' the wisp,' or some stray meteor, all through your poor little life. Come, you have bought my thoughts, and you shall have them, all hot and spiced as they are, and not a bit sugary;" and so saying she groped her way to him, stool and all, and deposited herself in a fresh bundle by his side.

Leigh strove for his old raillery with a burst. "Why, I invoked a Brownie, and, lo and behold! a regular little monster Frankenstein. Hands off, you witch! they feel like warm crawling things in the darkness."

"Leigh, Leigh, you foolish boy, why will you be so ridiculous? Leave off this play of words. I want to speak to you seriously; and afterwards I must tell you a little story."

"The story first, then."

"Fie! Do children have sugar-plums before their medicine? You must have my wholesome bitters first."

"Never mind; I am twisting up a wry face for my own benefit. What perverse imp possesses you this evening, Barbara?"

"There you are getting serious, waxing afraid; you always are when you say that mouthful—that sheep-bleating word, Barbara. Leigh, Hester told me something this morning, as we were sitting over our work together."

"Hester and you comfortable and confidential!—a miracle! Is the world coming to an end?"

Barbara sneered. Yes, she positively had a wicked little sneer all to herself in the dark; her lips curled themselves into the abominable angle of downward curves, and she laughed a little laugh not pleasant to hear.

"Good gracious, Leigh, how can you be so absurd as to believe that? Of course it was an unpleasant confidence or I should not have had it; a disastrous something that permits of a moral."

"Bab, Bab, do you ever repeat the Litany?" What a home-thrust, and from careless Leigh.

She turned it off with a shrug of the shoulder. "You interrupt every sentence," she continued pettishly. Those thrusts would make themselves felt, do what she would. "Do let me go on quietly. You remember those shares in the Spanish mine that Daddy was in such an excitement about last year, and which were to make all our fortunes?"

"Yes, of course; the Pater was wild about them; no one ever saw him so hot and strong about anything before. What, are they yielding profits already?"

"I don't know—I believe they are ; but that is not the question. Daddy has sold out half at a great loss."

Leigh whistled in consternation. "Why on earth has he done that?"

"To pay your college debts," returned his sister quietly. "I knew that Hester would tell you, and preach about it, and how you would feel it, and all that ; so I preferred choosing my own time, and telling you myself. You don't mind my mentioning your old troubles, do you?" she continued, a little anxiously ; "you would be sure to hear it from some one else, probably Hester, and she does prose so."

But Leigh was too far gone to thank her for her consideration. "The shares in the Spanish mine sold out, and at a loss, and for me!" he exclaimed, in a truly shocked tone. "Why, they were the El Dorado of my father's dreams ; he was to make I don't know what immense profit out of them."

"Yes, I know. He has only sold out half ; to Norman Strath, I believe. Come, come, Leigh, you must not fret about it. I have great faith in old nurse's saying, 'What is, is best.' The oddest part of it is, Hester is rather glad than otherwise."

"Absurd ! that is the way with you women ; business details are perfect hieroglyphics to you. Tell you a man's bankrupt, whitewashed, etc., you say you're glad ; he must be so much cleaner, or some such trash. Hester's a regular ninny."

"No, seriously, Leigh, let us give her her due ; she never did approve of these mines—never ; and she's very clear-headed about these sort of things."

"That's because she hates speculation."

"Yes, for such men as Daddy. She says they are very often only the cat's-paw in the hands of designing directors, and perhaps she is right. She owned she had not a bit of faith in these mines, and wondered Norman Strath could be such a fool as to buy the shares. She only wished they were all gone, even at a loss ; and it was a terrible thing to think most of Daddy's professional earnings were laid by in such a treacherous concern, and one of these days we should wake up and find ourselves without anything to maintain us for the future."

"It is very strange ; Hester has generally so much sense," considered Leigh, half-shaken, and yet loath to be convinced. "If she believed all this nonsense, why did she not use her influence to persuade my father to sell out at once ? Not that I have any faith in a woman's judgment on business matters."

"Ah, I have in Hester's ; but she did of course what you suggest. She was talking to him till twelve o'clock last night."

"Well ?"

"Well, it was not a bit of good ; he is perfectly bigoted on that point. Distrust Don Alvaro Lopez and his beloved mines—never. He only got hot and angry over it. Hester declared she had never seen him so fierce before."

"The Pater fierce ; what a lark !"

"Oh, Leigh, I have seen him so once, and I never wish to see it again ; it is too cruel."

"Oh, I forgot," groaned Leigh, and then silence fell on them both. Barbara edged her stool a little closer, and slid her hand under his arm, giving it a sympathetic little squeeze as she did so, to which her brother responded with a sigh.

Poor Leigh ! it was strange to see how his many virtues were neutralised and rendered worse than useless by the vacillations of a will that was its own magnet, yet which veered from point to point with every waif and stray of present feeling.

With all the qualities that make up a noble character, he yet fell far short of even simple mediocrity, and from the want of a true balance and a little rightly-directed moral courage his very virtues became faults ; in a word, he was the creature of impulse, and so it was that even his bravery became recklessness and his generosity extravagance ; his moods of sweet temper alternated with snatches of sullen caprice, which in turn gave way to fiery outbursts, while the very freshness of his youth, from being fused in the world's crucible, became hot, passionate, and pleasure-loving, which he was at once too indolent to seek, and too morally weak to renounce.

His was the nature that most easily succumbs to temptation, and yet is capable of such depths of contrition and such power of love, that even in the very slough of despond it may find a foothold, wading out by a miracle of manhood, perhaps to fall deeper, or by the help of grace to try again the steep and narrow way. Many are the loving and erring ones who thus make their robes white at the last. Such was Leigh Heathcote, his father's idol, and beloved too by man, woman, and child, to whom his great personal beauty, brilliant parts, and unfailing good nature were powerful recommendations. No one ever knew Leigh to do a mean action, speak an ill-natured word, or refuse an office of kindness. He might be weak, foolish, something different every day, and nothing long ; but he was hand-

some, merry Leigh, "Gipsy Leigh," as they called him, and that was all.

And so every man, woman, and child round Sunningford knew Dr. Heathcote's son and loved him, speaking gently of the young master's follies, or overlooking them altogether, to talk eagerly of his little kindnesses, "bless his bonnie face and that frank blithe tongue of his;" and Barbara, from the bottom of her silly faithful heart, adored him, living in an innocent twinship of affection, to which he responded good-humouredly with such measure as he had.

Such was the youth, still almost a boy, who left his father's home and the monotonous everyday little world in which he had hitherto lived, for the brilliant seductions of college life.

Let all impartial parents judge whether this was not a daring experiment for Dr. Heathcote to send out this unfledged boy of his, dangerously alive to his own attractions, eager for life and the excitement of pleasure, yet ignorant what either meant, to send him out into the midst of an untried world without preparation and without precaution.

And yet the good doctor thought he was doing his duty, and that Leigh, with his talents and steadiness, would grow up a great man, and make his own fortune and his sisters' too. "And no one will believe," continued the simple-hearted doctor, "when they see his brilliant career,—no one will believe he was a country doctor's son; they will only remember that he belongs to the Heathcotes, one of whom fell in the Punjaub at the head of his glorious Sikhs." And so without a misgiving, and with many prayers, Dr. Heathcote launched his goodly freight on the sea of life.

Leigh became at once the alternate pet and prey of a large and brilliant circle, which gloried in numbering in its ranks all the titled folly and moneyed extravagance of the university; and Leigh's poor little home purse being soon drained, there were plenty of false friends with ready offers of help; so the first downward step was taken, pecuniary liabilities incurred, and, before the poor boy realised his position, he was heavily and hopelessly in debt.

But this was not all. It was just at the close of the first year that one of those disgraceful fracas occurred which sometimes disturb the even tenor of university life.

There was nothing novel in its features—a giddy wine-party, youthful heads inflamed and maddened with wine, and resolved on mischief; a street row with the roughs; glorious

sallies and a victorious assault. But this time there were graver consequences: a proctor had been severely injured, knocked down and trampled under foot in the scuffle, and some said not by accident, as there was a grudge owing; and all the college authorities were up in arms, and justice demanded severest retribution. And so five freshmen—luckless Leigh Heathcote among them—were brought up before their outraged judges and summarily punished. In vain poor Leigh protested, in conscious innocence, that he knew no more of the events they narrated than a babe unborn; in vain he stammered out that he had never seen or touched the injured proctor; that Lord Dipsley's champagne had got into his head, and that he had no recollection at all of the evening in question, except that the roughs were letting off fireworks in the quadrangle, and that the squibs were in his head, till he found himself suddenly tucked up between the blankets; and much more to the same purpose. But it was all in vain; circumstantial evidence was against him: he had been seen in the streets in the very thick of the fight by the ringleader's side—the injured man himself swore to it: he must go down and swallow his disgrace as he could in a year's rustication.

When the news reached home, Dr. Heathcote was nearly beside himself. In vain Barbara and even Hester reasoned and pleaded and implored, alleging his youth as an excuse, and hinting at his probable innocence. The doctor would hear nothing, and listen to nobody.

“A Heathcote to disgrace himself so!—my son, my only son drunk, in a common street row in the midst of blackguards and prize-fighters—the boy I would have trusted with untold gold!” And for all his grey hairs, the old man could have found it in his heart to lift up his voice and weep. His grief was terrible. To his old-fashioned sense of integrity and honour, his son had eternally disgraced himself, and, in a lesser degree, his own father too. He could never lift up his honest head again in the village; he hung it in a sad crest-fallen manner when the fathers of other boys passed him; his grey hair grew white with his trouble, and unwonted lines wrinkled his broad forehead. He, who had hitherto none but loving and tender words for all his children, now spoke brusquely to his daughters, drawing tears from their eyes by the very sternness of his rebukes. “You have all spoilt that boy,” he would say; “you have made him a fool among you; and now look what you have made of him, a drunkard—a Heathcote a drunkard! I thank

Heaven your mother never saw this day ! I thank Heaven she was spared this ! It would have brought her earlier to the grave, as it will bring me, ungrateful boy that he is !” Ah ! what had become of Dr. Heathcote’s clear sense and sweet temper, that he could forget his own share of the blame, and lay it on his innocent daughters ! Barbara waxed wroth under these unjust reproaches. She knew how this delay of his father’s forgiveness must add to Leigh’s trouble ; she thought of him hiding away in his poor little lodging some few miles from Oxford, not daring to come home until they sent for him ; thought of him till her heart grew sick with pain.

“Is the poor boy never to be forgiven ?” she would cry ; “we will take all the blame, Hester and I, if you will only have him home again, and not let him be alone there with his sore heart. Oh, father, how can you be so hard ? If a man fall once,” gasped out the little sister, with kindling eyes, “is he never to have a helping hand, is he never to rise again ? You have helped to spoil him, father ; you are more to blame than he.”

“Oh, Barbara, how can you !” exclaimed Hester, terrified.

“Nay, she is right,” returned Dr. Heathcote—and his mouth lost all its sweet curves in its sternness—“but it well becomes my daughter to tell me so ;” and at that richly-deserved rebuke Barbara’s fiery nature dissolved in tears, and she threw herself on his neck in unfeigned contrition, but all in vain—neither Barbara’s reckless courage, Hester’s reasoning, nor Connie’s endless fretting availed anything ; it was Sir Geoffrey Hunsden who at last managed to make the unhappy father see it in a more reasonable light.

“Why, ’pon my honour, doctor,” he said one day, in his blundering way, when he came upon the miserable little conclave just broken up by one of Bab’s furious outbursts—“’pon my honour, you should look at this thing like a reasonable man.”

“Of course, Sir Geoffrey,” answered Dr. Heathcote, with a queer fierce sort of satire, “I am to like my son to be a drunkard, I am not to be ashamed of it, nor of him either, at least so Barbara tells me.”

“’Pon my honour, Miss Barbara’s a sensible little creature, and means well. Don’t scold her, doctor ; she and Hester both mean well. We all think, we do, indeed, sir, that you are too hard on this poor lad.”

“It is the first time in my life, if I am,” replied the father grimly.

"Well, you know, of course, you must be angry at first, and all that; but, as Lady H. said to me the very minute before I came out, 'The good doctor must remember he's only a lad for all that.' Those were her very words, doctor."

"Humph! I don't see that age, or want of age, offers any excuse; look at his bringing up, Sir Geoffrey."

"Yes, that's just what we do," returned simple Geoffrey; "it is not as though the fellow had any knowledge of the world, or anything like that. 'Pon my word, I believe he was as innocent as Dame Crumpton's last baby. That's just what I want to tell you."

"Well, well! I am following you," interrupted the doctor impatiently; he was growing testy of late.

"Well, as I was saying," continued the young baronet, growing redder and redder, and stammering in his eagerness, "Lady H. and I both agree that his wasn't the right sort of bringing up."

"Thank you," began the doctor angrily; but Hester came to her lover's rescue.

"Father, you are interrupting him; please, hear what Sir Geoffrey means to say."

"I certainly meant no offence, doctor. I will take my affidavit of it; it is only my blundering way of putting things: what I mean is, that the lad had a sort of old woman's education; he never went to school, never mixed much with other fellows; learnt from his sister's governess, or what you and the vicar—an old woman himself—could teach him; that's what I mean by his bringing up; and, 'pon honour," continued Sir Geoffrey, waxing eloquent in his earnestness, "to turn a fellow like that, with all his ignorance of the world, into the midst of a gay university!—well, if he hadn't gone wrong, with his attractions and—what do you call it?—want of ballast, you know, featherheadedness, etc., why, it would have been a miracle, by Jove! it would."

"Do you think so?" said the doctor, shaken, in spite of himself, by Sir Geoffrey's rough eloquence.

"Think so—that's just it. If you would only look at it like a reasonable man. Why, the lad is nothing but a cat's-paw in the hands of Dipsley and Saunders. I know the crew. Why, perhaps they drugged his wine to make him drunk, you know."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Heathcote; "you don't say so."

"Yes I do ; it is all as plain as a pikestaff. Wanted him to do some of their nasty tricks ; knew he was a Heathcote, too honourable, by Jove ; invited him to a wine, drugged his champagne. Bless you, Lady Hunsden told me all about it. They did it to my father once, and he cudgelled them soundly for it ; one of 'em—Barnes it was, General Barnes—never forgot his licking ; and serve 'em right, too—the brutes."

"Good heavens !" again exclaimed the doctor, but his tone was mild, and his face was radiant with joy. "Drugged his wine ; a Heathcote too honourable. I never thought of that before. Give me your hand, Sir Geoffrey ; you are a good fellow," and the doctor drew his hand across his eyes.

"And you'll have him home," hazarded Geoffrey. It was well to strike while the iron was hot. "It is no good leaving him to get wild over it all ; it hardens a fellow so, and then if you like he might get the wrong bit in his mouth."

"True, true, you are right. I've been too hard on the poor boy. Come and kiss me, Bab ; we'll have him home, and pay his debts ; it shan't be my fault if he hasn't another chance."

"Then why not write to him at once, sir ?" suggested Sir Geoffrey cunningly ; "and I'll post the letter ; I'm riding into Brackley by and by."

"A good thought and a kind one. Yes, yes, I'll go and do it at once. 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.' I have let too many go down on mine. Come in in half an hour's time for the letter ;" and the doctor bustled off to the little brown room at the end of the passage, full of musty books and cabinets of curious minerals, which was known in the house as the doctor's study. As the door closed upon him, Hester moved quietly across the room and took Sir Geoffrey's hand, pressing it softly in both her own.

"Thank you, Sir Geoffrey," she said, and the tears shone in her eyes ; "you have been our best friend ;" and really at that moment something of reverence and tenderness stole into Hester's frozen-up heart for the man whom she had set herself to marry.

It ought to have been a proud moment for her lover to see the beautiful glow on Hester's face, and to feel the warm pressure of her hands ; but to the disgrace of humanity it must be said that never was a young man more embarrassed than he as he stood growing redder and redder, holding her hand loosely, with a painful uncertainty as to what he was expected to do with it, till he dropped it awkwardly at last.

"'Pon honour," cried honest Geoffrey, as he rode down the Brackley lanes, wiping the heat from his brow, "I don't know how it is, but her very kindness seems to awe and take the spirit out of a fellow, there's something so tremendous in her way of doing it. By Jove, she is a splendid woman! quite a picture, you know; but, however, she will condescend enough to marry me, and what I shall do with her when I've got her, by Jove, I don't know. I must leave all that to Lady H.;" and with a sigh that ended in a whistle the luckless wooer dismissed the subject from his mind.

"Did I not tell you what a noble heart there was under all that simplicity?" cried Hester triumphantly to her sister, as soon as they were left alone. "Here have you and I been wearing and fretting ourselves to death over this miserable business without doing any good, and Sir Geoffrey comes in and settles everything with the greatest ease, just by an honest suggestion or two."

"He is a very good fellow," returned Barbara; "and it is not his fault that he is so slow and stupid; but of course in your position, Hester, you must find out more virtues in him than other people can." So spoke ungrateful Bab, and as she spoke a frown settled down on Hester's fair face—a frown that said, as plainly as it could, that this should be her last, as it was her first confidence.

And so Leigh came home. The few days' waiting had hardened him, as Sir Geoffrey said, and he came prepared to brave it out as recklessly as he could. But when he saw the altered look on Dr. Heathcote's face, all the spirit of his manhood died out of him, and he fairly threw himself into his father's arms, with the bitter sob of a child: "Father, I have been very wicked."

"Hush, hush, my son;" but the doctor's eyes were dim as he said it. "Let us forgive, Leigh, as we hope to be forgiven; the good God knows what need we all have to say that," and so he comforted him.

And so Leigh was forgiven, and reinstalled in his father's favour; but, perhaps, those first few days at home were the most wretched he had ever known.

It pained him—for Leigh had a tender heart—to see the lines of care on his father's face, and to mark how his old gaiety had left him, and what effort it cost him to say the cheerful nothings that once made the fun of the family circle; but this was only a part of the trial. The day following the reconcilia-

tion, Dr. Heathcote called his son into the study, and gravely, but kindly, asked him for a list of his debts.

"Every one, and to the uttermost farthing, Leigh, though they cost me half my earnings; truth, truth, and nothing but truth. Let us put a brave face on the matter, and then, and not till then, we shall breathe freely."

And Leigh did as he was bid, though it was the bitterest pill he had ever swallowed in his life; in his ignorance of monetary matters, the sums that he was found to have spent, the liabilities that he had incurred, seemed incredible, and nearly scared him out of his senses.

"Have I ruined you, father?" he would say piteously, every now and then; and the doctor, smiling down his own bitter fears, would answer hastily: "No, no, Leigh, don't look so frightened; I have a sum laid by for a rainy day, and, God helping, my son, we will never see one so rainy as this again."

"No, indeed," interrupted Leigh eagerly. "I will never get into debt again, father; never, I will swear to it, I would starve rather." And to do him justice, Leigh to a great extent kept his word.

Things grew brighter by and by, sunshine stole back into the old home, and Leigh soon found congenial employment.

Sir William Travers—one of Dr. Heathcote's most influential patients—struck by Leigh's pleasing exterior and winning manners, offered to engage him as tutor to his only son; and though the doctor, scrupulous to a fault, laid a full account of Leigh's high crimes and misdemeanours before his worthy patron—even unconsciously exaggerating and making the most of them in his chivalrous nicety, Sir William chose to ignore the knowledge, and reward the culprit.

"I don't think much of a young fellow, just over twenty, getting into a scrape like that,—hundreds do; besides, he has been sorry, and done his penance, and there the matter ought to lie. I like him; he has good abilities, a tolerable temper, and that's enough. You see, it will be a great thing for me to get a young fellow like him to train Rolf, for the boy, what with his sickly health, and from being brought up with girls and governesses, is a regular milksop, and I want a tutor who will put up good-humouredly with his dunceship, and teach him to ride, and hunt, and fish; and if I don't mistake, it is just the life that will suit Master Leigh," and to this latter clause the doctor could not fail to assent.

And so for some two or three hours of the day Leigh dragged

his reluctant pupil through a sort of classical A B C, and then—what was far more congenial to both—taught his charge to ride, shoot, and fish, or put him through the mysteries of cricket and other athletic sports. It was an easy gentlemanly life, and brought him into close acquaintance with Sir William's splendid hunters; but it had this drawback, it left him too much master of his time, and with many unoccupied hours on his hands; and this, to one of Leigh's temperament, was in itself a great evil, for from the beginning of time Dr. Watts' simple adage holds good that—

“Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do;”

and for idle brains too. One could easily predict, before Leigh had been many months at home, that his giddy head and impulsive nature would lead their owner astray again.

CHAPTER V.

DORT'S MILL.

“And as I entered, an ineffable fact
Met mine upon the threshold.”

E. B. BROWNING.

THE silence had lasted some minutes between the brother and sister, and Bab's little hand had travelled many times up and down Leigh's coat-sleeve in a sort of mesmeric sympathy, before the latter roused himself from his unusual abstraction.

“Yes, that's the way with you women,” he said in a sort of vexed tone; “you hit a fellow when he's down. Bless you, it's the way of the world.”

“Leigh, how can you speak so unkindly?” cried Barbara, and the indignant tears sprang to her eyes in the darkness. “I only told you because I fancied I could do it without hurting your feelings, and you would be sure to hear it from some one else. Next time I will leave it for Hester.”

“I didn't mean you, Babchen,” interrupted her brother soothingly, and he gave her the rough kiss which was his only mark of fondness. “Why, every one knows what a faithful little soul you are. What I meant was that I understand now all Hester's hints and innuendoes, and the sudden new primness

of her ways. 'We must all try to be less extravagant, Leigh; father has had many calls on him lately. I would not ask him to buy a new horse if I were you,' and so on,—all sorts of little goody speeches, that riled me so. Hester has the trick of vexing a fellow, and no mistake. She lays down the law so."

"Yes, she does; but I know she means it for the best," replied Barbara good-humouredly; for, by some nameless but generous instinct, she never allowed any one to attack Hester but herself. "I suppose she fancied you needed the warning because of this."

"Yes, give a dog a bad name and hang him," grumbled Leigh. "I declare I should often cut up rough over Hester's prudent speeches, if it were not that she is so confoundedly handsome."

Barbara felt a twinge that amounted to pain.

"Do you mean that that makes any difference in a sister?" she asked in a stifled voice. "You can't mean that, Leigh?"

"Why not, I should like to know? Why should a fellow be blind to his own sister's beauty? When Hester smiles, and looks you full in the face with her great grey eyes, I often think the fellow's lucky who gets her."

"Indeed," observed Barbara coldly, and she edged a little farther away.

"Yes, indeed, and indeed, little jealousy," and Leigh pinched her cheek. "There's a pleasing tone, and which reveals the true nature of the animal. Now you're cross because you've not got Hester's satin skin or Connie's cream and roses."

"I wish—oh, I wish I were handsome, if it were only for your own sake, Leigh!" burst out from Barbara's full heart, beating now with envious pain.

Leigh laughed, but not unkindly. "Oh, the vanity of the creature! just listen to her. Handsome, indeed! Well, you're not handsome, Bab; I can't say that you are even pretty, but I would not change your little face for either of theirs."

"Leigh!"—oh, the start of joy.

"No, indeed. You did not think I would, did you? Somehow you've got a talking face, Bab, and that pleases me."

"A talking face! that sounds nice. By the bye, that reminds me I have forgotten all about my story."

"What story?" yawned Leigh. "Ah, but it's getting late, and I'm awfully sleepy, Bab."

"No, you're not; and it's just the nice time for telling an adventure, and nobody wants us downstairs."

"An adventure! Is it an interesting one? Well, fire away, Dame Muffet, I'm all attention;" and Leigh composed his drowsy head comfortably on the cushion.

"I can't say once upon a time, because it occurred yesterday afternoon," began Barbara in a tone of great relish; "but as I was walking down the Brackley lanes, near Dort's Mill, I met a little child running right in the middle of the road."

"And you put her on the side-path and walked on," interrupted Leigh. "Bother the child; get on, faster, Bab."

"But I can't get on without the child, because my adventure concerns her," remonstrated Bab. "Now you've put me out before I've begun."

"What an Irish speech, and what a stupid adventure, and what a silly you must be to repeat it!" exclaimed Leigh; but Barbara in a high voice silenced him.

"She was running right in the middle of the road, not ten yards from a great brewer's cart that was coming down upon her as fast as two fat horses could trot, and the brewer's man asleep in his red nightcap. I was just turning round by the plantations when I met it, and it made me giddy for a moment. Of course I had the wee thing on the path in a trice—but, oh dear!——"

"It is an 'oh dear' indeed," groaned Leigh.

"It was such a beautiful little gipsy of a child," proceeded Barbara, perfectly ignoring him, "with her scarlet hood falling on her neck, and tangled brown hair, with such dimpled shoulders peeping out from her print frock."

"Some beggar's brat, I suppose."

"No, nor a lady's child either, but very clean and respectable for all that; well, I questioned the wee mite, holding her fast by the hand, lest she should escape from me;—who was she? where was her mother? where did she live? etc.; but to all my interrogations I only got the bewildering and mysterious answer, lisped out in such a baby voice:

"'Ta feyther has taken the ittle pinky shrimp, and Winnie wants to play with 'em.'"

"Pshaw! what trash! Who wants to hear baby-talk?"

"I must tell it in my own way," returned Barbara decidedly; "it's no good your being so impatient, Leigh. Well, I talked and I coaxed till I was weary, but I elicited nothing more than 'The feyther's ittle pinky shrimp, the curly-tailed fish with the black whiskers, eyes like Winnie's—Winnie a good ittle gell; Winnie love ittle pinky shrimp to play with 'ou,'

till I gave it up in despair." Leigh laughed scornfully. "I gave it up in despair, but cunning came to my aid. I professed a great interest in the pinky shrimp, was sure Winnie was a good girl, and father would let her play with it, and then blandly suggested that it might be waiting for us in the front parlour at home, and we must go home fast, or it would be gone. The bait acted wonderfully. Winnie took her thumb out of her mouth, relinquished my hand, and commenced whisking down a side lane with marvellous celerity, as fast as her little legs would carry her; her scarlet hood and brown curls streaming behind, and her dimpled fists cutting the air bravely, and so fast did the little maiden trot along that I only caught her just as she was turning into Dort's Mill."

"Into Dort's Mill, did you say?" interrupted Leigh, with the first tone of interest that Barbara had heard yet.

"Yes; I thought you were asleep, Leigh, and that I was only telling my story to Ben. Well, you know Dort's Mill? It has passed into other hands within the last two or three months. It's a square white house, standing in the middle of a neatly-kept kitchen garden, which divides it from the mill itself."

"As though every one round Sunningford did not know Dort's Mill? What a goose you are, Barbara!"

"I'm telling my story in my own way. Well, my charge trotted down the side-walk, and round the flower-beds, and into the little front passage, and then stood on tiptoe and essayed to turn the handle of a door on the right-hand side. Here, however, I interposed, taking down her chubby hands, and giving a timid knock instead. 'Come in!' said a clear sweet voice, and Winnie and I went into——oh, Leigh! such a kitchen! such a regular, dear, old farmhouse kitchen as I have often dreamt about, but never seen in my life!"

"Yes, I know—at least get on," yawned Leigh; but the yawn was less sleepy than hitherto.

"There was a great sunny lattice wide open, and over-looking beehives and apple-trees, and a wide fireplace, with immense settles round it, dressers laden with gaily painted china and pewter mugs that shone like silver, and a creeping baby on the rug, with a fat puppy lying on its back beside him, with one of his worsted shoes in its mouth, and at the window a young woman sat sewing, and singing a low tune, while she softly rocked an empty cradle. On seeing a stranger enter with the child, she dropped her work and rose with a

curtsey ; it was then she turned her face to me, and, oh, Leigh ! it was the most beautiful face I have ever seen."

"Come, this is getting interesting," interrupted Leigh, pretending to stretch himself ; "get on, and don't be prosy, Barbara."

"I never felt less prosy in my life. I wish I could make you see that face, but I don't know how to begin." Then, as an odd little laugh sounded out of the darkness : "I know you distrust my descriptive powers, but I will give you some idea of her for all that. She was such a grand-looking creature, and yet so calm, with such splendour of proportion, such a noble bust, and her face pale and beautiful, and yet so grave ! If she had been a little darker, her eyes, and hair, and skin, I mean, she would just have reminded me of Ruth when Boaz lighted upon her among the reapers. I always fancied her sweet widowed beauty something like this, only more Oriental."

"And with a hook nose, I suppose."

"Don't be profane, and mar such a pretty picture as I have drawn for you. I think her face would have been too white and passive, but for her eyes ; but they were so lovely ! Do you know, Leigh, they reminded me of a cow's ?"

Leigh burst into a loud boisterous laugh.

"You need not laugh. If you had only stood, as I have, for ten minutes at a time, watching Farmer Dyson's beautiful Alderney chewing the cud under the apple-trees, on a summer's afternoon, you would understand what I mean, and own to the truth of the simile. There was the same lustrous, far-away, patient look in her eyes, speaking and yet dumb, that the Alderney had as she looked placidly across the paling at me, chewing her sweet second repast."

"And what did this cow-like creature say to you ?"

"Oh, Leigh, don't ! You could not talk so if you had only seen her. Well, Winnie opened the conversation in her usual style, by running across the kitchen and pulling her gown, lisping out : 'Oh, mammie Ruth, feyther's taken away Winnie's ittle shrimp.' The young woman smiled, and patted the curly head, and then turned to me.

"'I have found your little girl in great peril,' I replied, answering her look ; 'she was running down the Brackley lane right in the middle of the road, not many yards from a great brewer's cart, and the horses were trotting right upon her.'"

"The young woman uttered an exclamation, and snatched the child to her breast, holding her tightly, and smothering her

with kisses, though the little one murmured and tried to get free.

"'Naomi, Naomi!' she cried, and at the call another person entered the kitchen, whom I saw at once was the mother; a pale sickly-looking young woman, deeply marked with the smallpox, but with a gentle pleasing expression. 'Naomi, our Winnie has been in danger, and this young lady has saved her and brought her home. She was nearly under the wheels of a great brewer's cart. Think, sister, if Paul had come home and found his little girl a crushed and bleeding corpse,' and she strained the child closer in her tender arms, making pitying little moans over her, while the little maid only struggled harder to be free.

"'The good God is always merciful,' returned the mother quietly, but her pale face grew a shade paler. 'He has saved Paul and me often from pain. Give me my baby, Ruth,' and her eyes had a fond hungry look in them—a mother's look, Leigh—till Ruth put the child in her arms. It was strange then to watch the quiet mesmerism of her look and touch; for the little creature ceased at once to fret and struggle, and nestled down into her bosom as her rightful resting-place.

"'She has often given us the slip before,' said Ruth, 'but never wandered so far away. She has been playing in the kitchen with a lobster Paul was taking into town. She must have followed him in the hope of going with him and seeing it again. All creatures alive or dead, birds, beasts, or fishes, are Winnie's rightful playfellows. But I am keeping you standing; sit down, Miss Heathcote, for you must be weary with your long run.'

"'You know my name, then,' I returned, surprised.

"'Yes,' she stammered out; and all of a sudden such a colour came into her face, not a pretty ordinary blush, Leigh, but a great rush of crimson blood, that swept across her whole face and neck, but it was gone in a moment. 'Yes,' she continued, more composedly, as she took up her sewing again, 'I have seen your sister at the school; and of course there is a family likeness. I knew you were one of Dr. Heathcote's daughters. Besides, I have seen you at church.'

"'I am sure I have never seen you before,' I returned decidedly.

"'No, I daresay not. I have only been at Dort's Mill a few weeks. My father is dead, and since my brother went away I have come to live with my sister and brother-in-law,

My name is Ruth Canham, and you will know me soon well enough, for I am elected as village schoolmistress.'

"'Indeed,' I returned in great astonishment; 'then you are the new mistress whom my sister mentioned. I remember, she sang your praises all dinner-time.'

"Again the same rush of colour, the same returning paleness. Then she sat and sewed in silence. I drew my chair a little nearer to her and the open window, and sipped a mug of cider that Naomi had thoughtfully brought for my refreshment, and looked out on the beehives and the apple-trees, marvellously well content, while Naomi drew down her sleeves and fastened them neatly, for she had been washing in the outer kitchen, and sat down near us. Winnie, now pacified, joined the infant group on the rug. I don't know why, but it seemed as if I had known them for years. A sort of sunshiny peace seemed to break over me: I could have sat there for hours."

Was it a sigh or a yawn that broke from sleepy Leigh? Barbara did not hear it.

"There was a gravity on Ruth's face, and a sort of chastened uncomplaining sadness on Naomi's, that seemed to forbid any loud or merry talk. I know I quite hushed my voice as I said:

"'I hope you like your new post, Miss Canham?'"

"'Nobody calls me Miss Canham, not even the children,' she answered. 'I am always Ruth; please remember that, Miss Heathcote. Yes, I love my children and my duties already.'

"'She is almost wearyful in her love of babies,' said Naomi, in that sleepy placid voice of hers; 'look at her now.' And she pointed to Ruth's foot, that still moved at intervals the rocker of the empty cradle. 'She will go on like that for hours, singing away, and never minding that Reuben is safe on the rug or in my arms. Sister, you will never rest till you have your own arms full.'

"Again the sensitive blush; but Ruth's tone was playful.

"'Come down to the school sometimes, Naomi, just before mid-day, and you will see my arms full enough, two or three little ones creeping into them, and another two or three asleep on the hem of my gown. God bless them all, say I.'

"'But it wearies you, Ruth,—never deny it. These ten days past, since you first commenced your new work, I see you quieting and sobering down—none of the old songs—nothing so light a step; and such a tired face, Miss Heathcote, when

she comes in from her evening stroll down the lane. She loves a breath of evening air, and a peep at the shining stars, does Ruth.'

"Ruth, plucking at her thread, broke it, and stooped for a fallen reel. Every now and then, as Naomi talked, her large brown eyes came back from their far-away look and gave me quick searching glances. I felt she was measuring me with Hester; yet some trick of my face pleased her, for she finished her scrutiny with a little smile.

" 'Ruth is very difficult,' went on Naomi, in her simple way. 'It does seem hard for her, who was the spoilt child at Dairy-mead Farm—that was our old home, Miss Heathcote—and never did anything, till the brother went wrong and everything was sold up and went to ruin,—it does seem hard for her to fash and slave herself with other folk's children, while all the time she has a brother and sister who would share their last crust with her, and keep her like a lady.'

"Ruth raised her earnest face, and looked at her sister. 'Naomi!' she said warningly.

" 'Nay; I appeal to Miss Heathcote, she has a kind true face, and does not seem above talking to simple mill-folk. Is it not wrong of Ruth, all for just a little bit of pride and some palaver about Paul not being her own brother—though I am sure he treats her as though he were—to fag herself with this new school business, and she not strong, and taking after the mother, who died long before she was my age, when she might bide comfortable with me and the children?'

"I looked at Ruth without answering, studying for a minute a face that was certainly as proud as it was pure.

" 'You have lived with her all her life,' I said, at length; 'but I, who am a stranger, read her better than you do. She would rather starve than owe her living to her brother-in-law.'

"Ruth darted a strange wistful look at me.

" 'Thank you, Miss Heathcote. I see I have found a friend. You are one who can grasp truth in an instant. Naomi, you must believe me now. I love you, I love Paul and your children dearly, I would work for you—beg for you—die for you, if needful; but I could not live here happily, making your home my home—my own happy home,' she added, with an emphasis, 'unless you suffer me'—with a little laugh—'to bring my own grist to the mill. We are not rich—nay, why should we hide it?—we are very poor, hampered, as all

beginners are, and struggling. But there, I think we have troubled a stranger long enough with our affairs. Change the subject, Naomi, please.'

"Only a small farmer's or, rather, a yeoman's daughter, and such delicacy of feeling, such refinement of speech. I gazed at these two singular women with the strange longing to become better acquainted with them—to know them intimately—to be their friend, in fact; and as I rose to take leave something of this wish escaped me.

"'May you come and see us again, my dear young lady?' returned Naomi, much gratified. "As often and for as long as you like; you are always welcome. Are you not our Winnie's preserver?'

"'Come, for you are welcome for your own sake,' added Ruth abruptly, with one of her strange looks; and she pressed my offered hand warmly.

"'I will, I will,' I answered her cordially; 'and I will come and see you at your school, and bring my great dog, Ben, to amuse the children.' And so ended my first visit to Dort's Mill."

"And a very pretty adventure it was, and very nicely narrated," said Leigh, rousing himself into an upright posture; but his voice had something odd and forced in it. "I will look out for this handsome new schoolmistress of yours and Hester's at church, and tell you in the sermon-time if I think she comes up to my notion of a thorough-bred Alderney."

For which facetious remark, which, in a figurative sense, was the last straw that broke the camel's back, Barbara fell upon him, to the accompaniment of Ben's strangled bark, till Connie came up with the doctor and Miss Heathcote's compliments to know what all that noise meant.

CHAPTER VI.

AN EVENING AT OAKLEIGH COTTAGE.

“O toil and woe, O love and death !
At least we know ye are not all !
Life but begins with passing breath,
Fruition lies beyond the goal ;
So turn we to the toilsome plain
By sorrow scathed, but purified,
And lift our burdens up again
As those whom God has touched and tried.”

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

It was a pleasant warm afternoon, such as one rejoices in, in the early summer, when Hester sat sewing at one of the windows of Heathcote House ; for, notwithstanding its small pretension and old-fashioned shabbiness, the house bore the family name, and Heathcote House, or Heathcote, as it was oftener called, was as well known for ten miles round as St. Ronans, Hunsden Park, or even Briarsley—the residence of Sir William Travers ; and it spoke well for the ancient respectability of the family, that generations of fathers and sons, many of them doctors, and all professional men, had lived, married, and died in the old house.

It was growing very ancient now. The rooms they had modernised were about as successfully renovated as old age when it puts on the garb of youth. Some two or three of the oldest rooms were shut up, being quite unfit to live in ; and it was the doctor's one innocent pride and guileless wish, that when, in the old Scripture phrase, “he should be gathered to his fathers,” Leigh should build a new and grander Heathcote on the site of the old house—a fond fancy, and well-nigh a hopeless one, founded on his imperfect knowledge of his son's character.

The room in which Hester sat was one of those in which very doubtful improvements had been effected, to the loss of all Barbara's patience, who had stigmatised them as “useless innovations,” and an affront to all good taste. It was a long dark room, very narrow and low-ceiled, as were all the rooms, and the heavy oak wainscoting and old-fashioned recessed windows had been in perfect harmony with the whole. But Hester had declared that one room at least should be modern-

ised and made habitable ; and though the lowness and narrowness were unalterable, yet French windows, gilt paper, and handsome carnation chintz should work wonders ; and if her father would only let her whitewash that hideous painted ceiling, full of smoke-dried sprawling Cupids, and replace the high wooden mantelpiece with a marble one, he would see what an elegant modern drawing-room she would make.

But the doctor, though he had yielded with a sigh to some of the improvements suggested by his enterprising daughter, was firm on the subject of the painted ceiling and carved mantelpiece, as he declared the former a work of art, and the latter a carving of no ordinary merit. Moreover, he stipulated that the dining-room and his own study should be left just as they were, and only the women's apartments, as he contemptuously termed the drawing-room and breakfast-room, should be remodelled to Hester's fancy.

And so Hester and Connie had a grand time of it, and revelled in chintzes and new papers to their hearts' content ; but, as might be supposed, the whole was a failure. The gilt papers hung on the walls as gaudily as a ball-dress on an old belle. The sprawling Cupids and simpering deities, though scrubbed and scoured, looked smokier and grimier than ever, exposed to the full light of the handsome French windows. The large-flowered carpet made the room narrower, and not even the crimson-covered couches, artfully disposed, hid its many angles and recesses, while the tall blackened chimney-piece, with its heavy mouldings and grotesque carvings, yawned dark and cavernous, a gloom in a sea of light. It was a miserable failure, and so unutterably provoking that Hester sat down and had a good cry—a rare thing in quiet self-composed Hester, moved thereto by Barbara's ill-concealed triumph ; and then it was that Leigh and Bab, in their mischievous way, christened the old drawing-room by the name of the Piebald or Harlequin room. It was a life-long lesson to the young house-keeper. Hester never modernised again.

But on such an afternoon as this in question not even the Harlequin drawing-room could look otherwise than cheerful, with its three French windows opening on the green lawn, with the shadowed brightness beyond, and the early June roses peeping out of the ivy, and tapping at the window-panes. Who looked at soiled Cupids or misplaced clusters of oaken grapes, when they could gaze out at that long leafy lawn, at horse-chestnuts and stately old elms ? The only wonder was that Connie,

lounging on one of the carnation couches, did not betake herself instead to some soft mossy seat between the old tree-boles, and that Hester could sit and stitch so steadily without one glance at all that glory of greenery. If it had been Barbara, she would have been up and chasing the great purple butterfly that was floating so idly down the long aisle like a wind-stirred flower, or she would have been watching the brown bees, as they filled their honey-bags, making sweet hummings as they sipped their floral chalices. She would not have sat and sewed so quietly while the cuckoo was wooing her with his bright spring song, and all the twittering tumbling martens were abroad.

There was a weary heated look on Hester's face, and her forehead was contracted with a frown, as though in pain. Every now and then her eyes fell on the piles of new muslin curtains that strewed the carpet around her. One could see her work fatigued, its magnitude oppressed her.

The door opened and Barbara entered, dressed for walking ; as fresh as a rose, and with a bright expectant look on her face.

"Adieu, good people. There, what a worry ! I've broken the loop of my new grey glove."

Hester ceased her weary calculations—she was counting the unfinished piles, and looked up in some displeasure.

"Where are you going, Barbara ?"

"That is my business, as Leigh says," laughed Barbara.

She did not in the least mean to be provoking ; it was just her way, and she was so happy ; but Hester looked displeased for all that.

"I know it is useless to hope for a sensible answer from you, Barbara ; but I think you might have told me you were going out a little earlier than this. Here I have got all this work down expecting you to come and help me every minute, but you have no consideration !"

"Can't Connie help ?" answered Barbara shortly. "I suppose she could hem those curtains as well as lie on a sofa and read *David Copperfield*. She has a nice idle life of it, I must say."

"There you are ; always at that poor child," returned Hester fretfully. It was so hot, and the pile looked larger than ever. "Of course she will help when I want her. That is no excuse for you to go out and enjoy yourself, and leave us just when there is work to be done."

"I offered my services yesterday, and was refused, Hester," retorted Barbara, biting her lips, and trying hard not to lose her

temper. "Connie, you had better shut up that book, and run and fetch your thimble ; Hester wants you."

"If Hester wants me, she can tell me so," answered Connie crossly, and not offering to move : of all things she hated work the most.

"Well, well," returned Barbara impatiently, "you both seem in a pleasant mood this afternoon ; however, you must do the best you can. I can't offer to stop, for I have an engagement ; and, Hester, you may tell Daddy that he need not send Leigh to fetch me, for Mrs. Strath is sure to send some one home with me."

"Mrs. Strath ! always Mrs. Strath. I declare, Barbara, you almost live there. I can't say it's the best taste in the world, considering Norman's position here ; and I wonder father likes it—I don't."

"Then you may dislike it. Good-bye, Hester. I am sorry you object to my little pleasure, but it's nothing new ;" and so saying, Barbara, nodding fiercely, shut or rather slammed the door—a fact which did not improve Hester's poor aching head.

Well, it was hard and undeserved, and Barbara felt it so. Here she felt so happy and looked so nice, and now everything was damped and spoiled as usual—a cloud on her little *fête*. She had so determined to enjoy herself this bright June afternoon, and she had felt such pleasure in dressing herself. She had put on her soft grey dress, her one silk—her "go-to-meeting gown," as she called it—and her best lace ruffles—real Valenciennes—a piece of extravagance on which Hester would have frowned had she known it ; and as she had fastened her simple brooch, and brushed out more carefully the dark brown hair, which would persist in waving so obstinately over her eyes, she saw such a bright little face in the glass that it half reconciled her to her own want of beauty ; and now, what was the good of it, if Hester would persist in spoiling her day.

It was so unjust, too ; for she had offered yesterday afternoon to help with those curtains, but Hester had been cross with her about some trifle, and had refused to have them down, though it had been a wet day, and both she and Connie wanted employment ; and now she chose to be contradictory, and to sit down to them on a hot afternoon, and when she had a headache too, and had called her inconsiderate because she would not stay at home for a whim.

"It is so mean and so unjust," cried Barbara ; "I hate meanness and injustice of all things ;" and Barbara stood still

in the dusty road, and stamped with her little foot, till Ben, alarmed at his mistress's vehemence, and thinking it addressed to him, rolled over on his huge back, making unwieldy advances with his outstretched paws, and slobbering with his red tongue in the dust, till Barbara, laughing, though with the tears in her eyes, told him to get up, for he was a foolish fellow; and then tucked up her grey dress in dismay, as he made loving feints and dodges at her—leaping up to her shoulders in his joy at his restoration to favour. Refreshed by these flattering attentions on the part of her four-legged friend, Barbara's dragging and dignified step degenerated again into her usual hoppety one, and by the time she had unlatched the little green gate, the very black cloud lifted itself—frowns and all—off her crumpled-up forehead, and she was wandering among the trim flower-beds, admiring Norman's roses, and whistling back a challenge to the cuckoo in high good-humour indeed.

Mrs. Strath lived in one of those old-fashioned cottages that one sees in most country villages—a long white house with narrow windows, and a green verandah running all round, with glass doors back and front, opening on to a little sloping lawn full of crescent and star-shaped beds—with here and there a curiously-cut box, and a low privet hedge dividing it from the road in front, and a market-garden at the back.

That Barbara was an old and privileged guest might be seen by the way she avoided the more public mode of entrance, and skirting the green verandah on one side, suddenly popped her head in at an open window.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Strath!”

“Why, Barbara, do you know you are half an hour late? Here I have been sitting in state for I don't know how long, watching the shadows purpling the grass, and wondering what had become of you.”

“I could not help it: Hester made a fuss and kept me. She wanted me to stay at home and do some work, I believe, while Connie reclined on the sofa and read *David Copperfield*—that child is fearfully spoilt, to be sure—and then, because I pleaded my engagement to you, she was so disagreeable that I was obliged to stamp out my feelings in the dusty road, much to Ben's dismay—there!”—and Barbara made one of her puckered-up faces, which were always so irresistibly ludicrous.

“Well, well,” said Mrs. Strath, trying hard to preserve her gravity, but failing utterly—“we must make up for lost time, that's all; run up to the blue-room and take off your hat, for

if you stay there any longer you'll wear your new gloves all into holes, pulling at them so viciously—the blue-room, remember, Barbara; and you'll find a little breast-knot I've tied up for you on the toilette-table."

Barbara obeyed gleefully, and soon came dancing down again, looking fresher than ever with the damask roses fastened nattily into her grey dress.

"What a dear room, and how nice you look, Mrs. Strath, and how happy I am to be here," and Barbara disposed herself on a low stool at Mrs. Strath's feet, and looked round at everything well satisfied.

It was a cosy home-like room, always cool and shaded even on the hottest summer's day; there was nothing precise or stiff about it; tables well littered with work and books, looking wonderfully inviting with their reading-lamps and flower-baskets: with little old-fashioned couches and easy-chairs placed temptingly near them: and mingled with other flowering scents, the sweet dry odour of rose-pourri, which filled the great blue dragon china jars on either side of the fireplace. Barbara always thought of Hester's miscalled improvements, as she looked round Mrs. Strath's parlour. There was nothing modern here: no knick-knacks, or articles of bijouterie; but, instead, wonderful little oil-paintings grimed with age, in old black frames; or mirrors that distorted one oddly when one looked in them; china cups without handles, saucers with great ugly scars in them, two or three labelled minerals, and a marvellously-worked sampler set as a firescreen; and yet Barbara loved every one of them, and would finger and touch them gently, as one would the wrinkles in an old friend's face.

And then the soft motherly presence that filled the whole; the little trim figure, the worn delicate face in its widow's cap, the quiet refined voice; no wonder Barbara looked round well satisfied, and felt herself in a haven of content.

"Mrs. Strath, it is good to be here."

"My dear, you always say so, and it is pleasant to hear it; and yet it is strange that you should care to come and sit with an old woman like me."

"An old woman," interrupted Barbara indignantly, and she leaned her cheek on the soft white hand. "Why will you talk so?"

"Nay, it is truth, and a happy truth too. Ask Norman if I be not proud of my age; if I do not string up my years in

such a glad hurry, that I often add to them rather than diminish. Why are you sighing, Barbara?"

"Because I believe I understand it. Because I think I would change places—ah, how gladly—to have a real lived-out life lying behind me as you have. Sometimes, I think I should like to die young. What will the years bring to me?"

"A well-earned happiness, I trust. Ah, Barbara, you are a young thing to talk so. What have you done that you should enter into your rest, before me, who have borne the burden and heat of the day?"

Barbara hung her head a little sadly. "I never thought of it in that light—as a reward I mean—I only meant that I am so tired of this monotony and home-worry, sometimes I get so chafed and troubled, that I feel I would give up a dozen years of my existence only to live the remainder of my youth as other people live theirs."

"You are an enigma; I do not understand you. You have your troubles, of course; but what things do you lack that you have not in common with other young people? Health, strength, a tolerable disposition, a fair share of abilities, and a mind rather above the usual average belonging to girls. Are not these rich materials to work upon?"

"Ah! yes, materials; but what good are they? I have health and strength, of course, and I hope I am grateful for them. My disposition is not tolerable, thank you; my abilities only make me crave the more eagerly for the opportunity of acquiring knowledge, and where am I to acquire it in this more dead-than-alive place, this drawling mill-stream they call Sunningford, where there is not a person worth knowing."

"There is Norman," began Mrs. Strath, in maternal pride; but Barbara interrupted her:

"Yes, we have Norman, I grant, our one learned man among us. But what of that?"

"What of that? Why I should think——" returned her friend, half-affronted, but Barbara again stopped her.

"I know what you are going to say. You should think I ought to find some pleasure and profit in his conversation; but I don't, for I know he hates me; at least, if he does not, he snubs, and lectures, and scolds me, as if I were a child; laughs at my opinions, and ridicules my theories. He behaves quite differently to me to what he does to Hester. Mrs. Strath, you know I speak the truth."

"I know nothing of the kind. That is one of your absurd

fancies, Barbara. Norman is a kind friend to you and yours. Granted, that he laughs at you a little, and casts ridicule on what he calls your strong-minded arguments. Can you not bear a little satire from a clever man like Norman, when you bear it so good-naturedly from me?"

"No, I cannot," returned Barbara, with a very hot face. "It is different; you love me and are my friend, and all your hard sayings are to do me good. But Norman——"

"Wants to do you good, too."

"No, he does not; and if he did, it is no business of his, and so I often tell him. He does it to aggravate me, and put me in a passion; and then he laughs, and wishes I had Hester's calm temperament. The worst of it is," went on Barbara, in an aggrieved tone, which highly amused her friend,— "the worst of it is, that with all his disagreeable habits, one cannot positively hate Norman, and if one did, one would like to be a little appreciated even by one's enemy."

Mrs. Strath's low laugh was pleasant to hear.

"Then it all resolves itself into this, that Barbara hates to be laughed at, lectured, or treated like a child. I must give Norman a hint, or we shall have a grand quarrel one of these days."

"If you do, I will never speak to you again. No, it resolves itself into this, that Barbara is a miserably misplaced woman."

"My dear!"

"I have said it. I am suffocated and stifled up in this corner. I want breathing-room. I want to live, not to exist merely, like a chrysalis. I have wings; I can feel them. I must fly away."

"Whither, poor child?"

"Whither? Ah, that is the question. Perhaps life will come to me here. Ah, if it only would!"

"How old are you, Barbara?"

"Two-and-twenty next August. I am Daddy's autumn rose, you know—a little brown crumpled-up rose, parched and shrivelled by sun and wind, and set with little wilful thorns. I prick every one who touches me."

"Yourself most of all. Ah, Barbara! I am sorry for you, sorry for your restlessness and discontent; but I cannot blame you; I was just the same at your age."

"You!" cried Barbara, looking wonderingly up into the placid face, rather thin and pinched now, it is true, but still

fair and sweet for all that. "You, who are of all people so quiet and calm!"

"But I was not always so," returned the widow; "I have groped my way to calmness through the long darkness of pain. Barbara, I don't care much to touch on bygone days even to my own son; but you shall have a glimpse of my life—a faint passing glimpse of it, if you like."

Barbara's eyes sparkled; her whole face looked a mute entreaty.

"When I was your age, and long, long before, I challenged my fate in much the same words as you did just now. My life was too quiet, too monotonous, full of petty everyday worries. Ah, it was dull, Barbara; yours cannot hold a comparison to it. My parents were just dead; my only brother, and almost my only relative, had joined his father's regiment in Canada; and I was left in the charge of an old maiden aunt living in an uninteresting suburb of London. She did not understand young people. There was nothing in common between us. Her whole nature was uncongenial; her pursuits odious to me. She wearied me with her endless lists of charitable societies—soup-giving, flannel-distributing, soul-converting societies. It seemed to me that the poorest of her pensioners had a greater claim on her time and patience than I, her dead sister's child. But if she wearied me, I must confess I disappointed her. I would have nothing to do with her favourite ministers, clothing clubs, and maternity meetings. I withheld my money, or gave it stingily; and shut myself up in my own apartments, fretting myself, and beating against the bars of my cage like a prisoned bird. Nay, I was worse than you, Barbara, for I pined, and sickened, and moped till I fell ill and was in danger; and when my life was given back to me I wept and raged against the gift. I grew quite sullen in my convalescence; but a friend of my aunt, who had daughters of her own, and saw how I pined in this uncongenial atmosphere, had compassion on me, and took the poor motherless girl to her own home, and nursed the old roses back into my cheeks, and the light and hope into my heart. Ah, then it came—the happiness I had asked and for which I had prayed—when my cousin Marmaduke Strath returned from his travels—came down to Nettlewood—saw, loved, and made me his wife."

Barbara drew a long breath. Mrs. Strath looked at her and went on:

"Then indeed everything was changed. The sunshine! the

brilliancy almost blinded me. I lived now, for I loved—I loved. Ah, Barbara! beware of a jealous love. I loved to idolatry. Marmaduke was everything; nay, more than I desired, and we began our married life with a happiness that comes for few. We had each a fortune, but mine, in that dreary Clapham life, had never brought me any pleasure; now I revelled in it. We had a superb residence, rich furniture, handsome equipages, and my husband, who I could say with truth was one of the most attractive men you could see anywhere, soon drew round him a brilliant circle of rank, intellect, and fashion. We were both young, and fond of pleasure. He encouraged me in my love of display. ‘His beautiful Lettice should shine with the grandest,’ he said. Our days passed in a giddy round of pleasure, of which it sickens me now to think. There was a brief pause, it is true, when my boy was born; the novelty of my treasure so fascinated me that I would willingly have resigned my position in the gay world a little while to stay at home and watch my baby’s smiles, but Marmaduke would not have it so, and drew me on. I had my duties to fulfil to him and to my friends, he declared. The child should have the best of nurses; everything that money could buy—everything, alas! but his mother’s care. He would not have me moping in the nursery all day, and losing my fine colour. I was his wife; he could not do without me. Ah, Barbara! I loved my baby, but I idolised my husband. The child grew up, and ran, and prattled, and caressed every one but his mother, and she was a stranger to him. True, he saw a gaily-dressed lady enter his little nursery twice a day, who kissed him and showed him shining trinkets, but he soon wearied of them, and would run away to his nurse to be fondled on her lap—the nurse who had nourished him from her own breast. Barbara, believe me, I was faulty, unnatural if you like—weak and wicked too, but my punishment was very sore; part of it was that, for many, many years, even after I was widowed, my boy did not care for his mother—did not love me, and would seek sympathy from the merest stranger rather than from me.”

Barbara stroked her hand in mute sympathy.

“When my little girl was born—my golden-haired Lily, I made another faint resistance to Marmaduke’s will, but in vain. I was too much admired, too flattered to be left at home. If I stayed he would stay too; so I went. The old nurse who had taken charge of my boy had left to be married for the second time, and the little lad himself was thriving in a farmhouse

under her care. The servant whom the housekeeper had engaged for Lily turned out a careless slattern of a girl. She was not unkind to the little creature ; nay, I believe she loved her in her own rough way, but she was fond of gossiping in the servants' hall when the housekeeper was out, leaving the infant alone.

"Ah, Barbara ! don't ask me any questions ; in pity let me pass on. One night, when her heartless mother was dancing at the ambassador's ball, the little creature lay writhing in all the horrors of convulsions in her lonely nursery at the top of the great house."

"Mrs. Strath !" cried Barbara, in a tone of horror.

"Ah, it sounds too dreadful to be true, does it not ? while that wicked nurse—I must call her so, though I was ten times more wicked than she—was carousing down among the other servants for hours, my baby struggled with death-throes. It was asleep, smiling to itself like an angel when the girl went down. Something must have terrified it. No one knows, save God, who will demand that sweet innocent life at its mother's hand. But when relief came it was too late. When I ran upstairs, wondering at the unusual noise, and humming a gay waltz air all the while, I came suddenly upon it ; the stiffened limbs of my dead infant, with the death-agony still upon her face, and the wretched girl writhing in hysterics beside her. My heart became like a stone. Oh, Lily, Lily ! my golden-haired darling ! your mother bears that deadly wound in her heart still."

"Dear Mrs. Strath, I did not guess this. How could I ? Do not go on ; you distress me."

"Child, this was but a phase of your so-called life, and brilliant life too. Did I not say my punishment was sore ? Miserable mother that I was. I drank the dregs of a lifelong remorse. Marmaduke could not comfort me ; it was beyond his power. Only my God could do that in His own good time ; and I had not found my way to Him yet. I shut myself up, avoided society, never even noticed how my husband bore my absence, never wondered at his new taciturnity and unusual fits of depression, or if I did, only attributed it to the loss of our child, he who seldom gave a thought to it. It came out soon ; and I remember how stolidly and stupidly I listened ; how I angered him by my very apathy. We were beggared, he told me. What did that matter ? What did anything matter now ? We had thrown away two fortunes in our senseless extravagance.

We had been living beyond our means. Did I know he had speculated and lost? Yes, I heard all. I witnessed his despair, his mad anger; his, my Marmaduke's, and never winced. Did I not say my heart was turned to stone? But I woke soon. The very greatness of our misfortune, which stunned and unnerved him, roused me to something like my former self. I settled all business details, made arrangements with creditors for selling off house and furniture, for he left everything to me; and then, by parting with my own jewels, scraped together enough to live for some time till Marmaduke could find employment; and then, fetching our boy from his farmhouse, we settled down in a quiet continental town to begin life afresh together. It might have been well with us, Barbara, for we had a tolerable sum of money, if it had not been for Marmaduke's weakness. He was too proud to seek for employment, too proud to work. He just idled and fretted his days away; and at night, when I was asleep and dreaming of my Lily, he would go out and gamble away our poor little stock of money, now winning, now losing, deaf to my prayers, my remonstrances, my anger—he who had always regarded my least word. The craving fever for gold was on him; every farthing went. He was making our fortunes, he said, paying back to my boy and me all we had lost. I used to put my arms round his neck sometimes, and pray him by our love to listen to me, and he would not. He would push me off, and go out with that greedy look in his eyes to lose again and again, and all the time it was killing him, the fever of winning, the despair of losing, the fierce hunger, the horrible gnawing thirst, the deadly greed; ah, Marmaduke! He could not eat, he could not sleep; and then there came a day when the fever left him, and he looked out upon the sunshine with sane bright eyes, and a broken heart, and called me to him, and laid his poor dying head on my bosom and prayed God and his Lettice to forgive him, for he had ruined us. Ah, husband of my love, what need of forgiveness between thee and me!

“When that happened we were starving. I had hidden it from him as best I could, but often and often he had left us with only bread in the house; and many a day my boy and I have lived on a bare crust. Barbara, I never recall those days, I never think of them; only sometimes they return to me in my dreams. Child, not even to you will I speak of the days that followed my husband's death—days of desolation and anguish, starvation and terror. But God had not forgotten me,

and in my worst strait help came to the widow and the fatherless ; for then my great-aunt, whose relationship I had almost forgotten—whose very name was strange to me—died, bequeathing her little all to me : it was not much, but it seemed a fortune ; I had learned prudence in the school of adversity, and with care I contrived to live on a small annuity, and give my son a good education. We returned to England at once, and took up our residence in a town in the very house where my aunt had lived ; and those old pictures and curiosities you have so often admired belonged to her, and came to me with her other furniture. It was long before I could forget the past, and become reconciled to my present life ; but I set myself to win my boy's confidence and love, and with that happiness returned. My boy has been the consolation of my life ; and his quiet steady character, so different to his poor father's versatile talents, ensure his eventual success. There is only one thing in which he has ever pained me all these years—his taking those shares in the Spanish mines contrary to my wishes. I detest speculation, and have inoculated Hester with my fears. Yes, Norman has a great nature, and is a deep and earnest thinker. I do not fear for his future. We live together, as you see ; but one day I hope he will take a wife to himself. Sometimes I fancy, in spite of his apparent content, that the medical profession is not his forte, and that he feels his sphere of usefulness too contracted ; but he never says so : my boy is no grumbler in the ranks of duty. Nay, Barbara, do not look so downcast. My sad little story has been a sore punishment for your inconsiderate words."

"I had no idea you had suffered so," said Barbara, with a little sob ; "but all lives are not so sad as yours. I cannot take back my words : but you had some happy times, surely?"

"Some !" answered Mrs. Strath, and her eyes lighted brilliantly : she was forgetting to whom she was speaking. "Some ! When I think of Marmaduke's love, and those first five or six years of married life, I am sometimes tempted to forget the sorrowful end. I only think of what he was to me before Lily died."

"I thought so," answered Barbara triumphantly. A love like that swallows up pain. Mrs. Strath, I would give much to know I had those five or six years of happiness coming to me."

"Child, child, you are incorrigible : you do not know what you are talking about. But here comes Jeannie with the tea, and I must go and help her set the table."

CHAPTER VII.

NORMAN.

" We read or talked, or quarrelled, as it chanced,
We were not lovers, nor even friends well matched ;
Say rather, scholars upon different tracks,
And thinkers disagreed, he, overfull
Of what is, and I, haply, overbold
For what might be."

MRS. BROWNING'S *Aurora Leigh*.

IF there were one thing Barbara liked, it was Mrs. Strath's tea-table. She could not tell why, but it always seemed better than any one else's. Hester never could be made to understand the difference, and piqued herself not a little on her own table arrangements ; but Barbara persisted in her opinion for all that, and always thought having tea at Oakleigh Cottage was the finest treat in the world.

The tea seemed to have a different and more aromatic flavour drank out of those purple china cups with their egg-shell thinness. The very sugar was a puzzling experiment, taken up in those massive silver sugar-tongs, which always dropped every piece, much to the visitor's dismay ; and the silver cream ewer, which always held the richest and yellowest cream—no pretence of skimmed milk—was such an upright knowing little affair, with a crooked twisted little nose, which Barbara always called Paul Pry, much to Norman's endless mystification, and her friend's amusement. And then there never was such thin bread and butter anywhere else, or such curious out-of-the-way preserves. Barbara had never heard of preserved lettuce stalks, and green tomatoes, till she came to tea at Oakleigh Cottage ; but there they always were in glass saucers, reposing upon silver tripods, in company with a certain dark rich seed-cake known as Dundee, and compounded for Mrs. Strath's special favourites.

And yet Hester, in her housewifely pride, could never see anything to admire in Mrs. Strath's tea-table, and found fault with the great crusty brown loaf that was always placed at Norman's corner, in case he should come in hungry from his long country ride. But then, Hester was always sparing of her admiration of anything at Oakleigh Cottage, though

why she was so was beyond Barbara's knowledge and her own too.

"Ah, there is Norman!" exclaimed his mother in a pleased voice, as a firm heavy tread sounded in the passage. "Now I've poured out the tea, Barbara, come and take your old seat, and leave Norman his. There you are, my dear, punctual to a minute," she added, as the door opened and her son entered. "You see we have company to-night."

"I certainly did not expect to see Barbara," he said in a surprised tone, but giving her his hand cordially enough. "I saw Hester just now, but she never said a word about your being here."

"I daresay not," returned Barbara shortly, and then they all sat down. It was one of Barbara's fancies that the parlour at Oakleigh never looked half so cosy and homelike when Norman was in it, and she reverted to this opinion of hers with an odd persistency, as she looked across the table at him now. He was such a large man,—not clumsy, certainly, for his size, which exceeded the ordinary height,—Norman's dignity preserved him from awkwardness, but the little room seemed always smaller when he was in it. And then he was so ugly too. No one, not even his mother, could say much for his looks, though she had always a little word of praise for his mouth, which she declared was perfect. But many who were admirers of thews and sinews, called Norman Strath a fine man. He had a strong well-knit form, a splendid width of chest, and a well-poised head; but he was a plain man for all that. He had a dark sallow complexion, and a very low though not narrow forehead, which was made lower still by one smooth wave of hair, which would persist in lying flatly across it; and then his eyes, though they were keen and bright enough, were set deeply under overhanging brows, and his great square chin was half hidden with a reddish stubbly beard.

"I wonder Hester did not mention it," continued Norman, helping himself liberally from the brown loaf, and returning to the subject, very stupidly as Barbara thought. "I was summoned in the middle of the afternoon to prescribe for her. It was only a little headache and faintness, but Connie was frightened. The heat of the weather, I suppose, and she has been overdoing it again. I gave her a good lecture; it was nothing at all particular, so Barbara need not be alarmed."

"I am not at all alarmed, thank you," returned Barbara coldly, and in a tone that made Norman raise his eyebrows.

"The weather always tries Hester, and she was well enough when I came out."

"She must have been doing too much then, as Norman said," remarked Mrs. Strath. "You were quite right to scold her, my dear. Somehow I fancy Hester has not been quite herself lately; she looks delicate and careworn. I must speak to her father about her."

Norman tilted his spoon on the edge of his tea-cup, and listened with closed lips. Then he looked across at Barbara, who was saying to herself with a shrug: "They are throwing away their sympathy if they only knew it. Hester does not deserve any pity. It is only Sir Geoffrey who is making her ill. She despises him, and is going to marry him." And then she sat with closed lips too.

"My remark is treated with silence. I admire your professional reserve, Norman, but Barbara must know what ails her sister, and that something does, I am well convinced."

"Barbara is a follower of the great Machiavelli, mother, who holds that the true use of words is to disguise thought. You will have a sample thereof in her next speech;" but Barbara answered coldly: "As usual you mean exactly the opposite of what you say, but I shall disappoint you and hold my tongue. I get tired of plain speaking, it makes so much mischief. If Hester be ill, I do not know it; and if I did, I should not sympathise with her, for the remedy is in her own hands."

Norman's spoon fell down with a crash.

"A truly Barbara-like speech; clear, concise, and just to the point, and so exquisitely womanly. Truly we are all enacting *Much Ado about Nothing*. Give me another cup of tea, mother, if you please."

"But I hope, now you have discovered Hester's ailment, that you will prescribe something beneficial for her—a tonic, to brace her up, you know," continued Barbara with a modest primness. Of all things she knew how Norman hated anything professional brought on the tapis, "talking shop," as he called it. "You spoke of headache and faintness just now; were those her only symptoms?"

Norman eyed her keenly, and, if we must say the truth, a little savagely, and then he relaxed into a broad smile.

"Revenge is sweet, Barbara. I started an unlucky topic, Barbara, and you another. Come, we've shut up shop for to-night. And now, if you will tell me who picked my favourite

damask roses, I will give you a bit of news worth hearing in this dull village."

The pleasant hearty voice, very rarely addressed to her, restored Barbara's equanimity; and a very bright dimpling smile answered him:

"Mrs. Strath gathered the roses for me; and very pretty they look on my grey dress. You see I am obliged to say that, because you never pay compliments. And now for the news."

"Softly, softly; what a hurry you're in. You need not look at my mother, Barbara; she is in the secret as well as I; and by this time all Sunningford knows it."

"Do you mean," asked his mother eagerly, and her eyes sparkled, "that you and Dr. Heathcote——"

"Ah! I forgot all about that; that will keep till afterwards. You know St. Ronans, Barbara?"

"St. Ronans! and the dear old fir-woods where we had our picnic last week, and the forget-me-not meadows, as we call them, down by the Brackley stream—know St. Ronans! of course I do."

"Then you will be glad to hear that it has found a purchaser, and the family are coming to take possession of it in a few days."

"Glad! well, I suppose I am," returned Barbara doubtfully. "If they be pleasant people they will be an addition to our village society; but Ben and I will not like to be turned out of our dear old pine-woods for all the new people in the world."

"Ben and you need not be afraid: there will always be a public right-of-way through the fir plantations."

"Oh, then, in that case, I shall be very glad to see St. Ronans occupied. It was a shame such a beautiful old place should go begging for a tenant. But where in the world did you pick up this grand piece of news, Norman? I thought you never gossiped with your patients?"

"No more I do," replied Norman, in a piqued tone. "You are wrong there, Barbara. As it happens, my mother had it from headquarters—from Lady Strath herself."

"Your mother—Lady Strath—are they relations of yours, then?" cried downright Barbara. "And why have you never told me all these hours, Mrs. Strath, when you and I were talking together?"

Mrs. Strath smiled down into the eager face. "I think

you and I had plenty to do with our time, Barbara ; and the grand piece of news, as you call it, went entirely out of my head. Norman and I take it more quietly than you do. Yes, I had a letter from Lady Strath this morning detailing her plans, and giving me a commission or two."

"But who is she ? and why have you never mentioned her name before this ? and why has she bought St. Ronans ?"

"Gently, gently, my dear ; you ask too many questions in a breath. Lady Strath is my sister-in-law. You remember my only brother, whom I told you had gone to join his father's regiment in Canada ?"

"Yes, I remember. You said he was almost the only relative you had."

"The only near relative. Well ; he had a very brilliant and successful life out there ; was knighted for his services ; and, what is more, materially added to his fortune. He married a wealthy widow, so that he was richly endowed with all this world's goods."

"Why, then, did he not relieve your necessities ?" began Barbara wonderingly, and then stopped, colouring high at Mrs. Strath's warning look.

"I have been telling Barbara a little of my past history," continued Mrs. Strath, answering Norman's astonished glance. "She is a safe confidante, though a young one. Your question is a very natural one, my love, though you had better not have asked it at present. My brother died long before the time I needed friends, and my sister-in-law had left Canada, and I had no means of ascertaining her whereabouts, even if I had wished for her assistance, which I did not. She was a perfect stranger to me, remember ; and we never met until, thanks to my Aunt Bridget's bounty, we were comfortably settled in England."

"You are treating Barbara to a very prolix explanation, mother ; borrowing a leaf out of Lady Strath's book, I think. I hate the very mention of those days, and I wish she had fixed her residence a hundred miles from here."

Mrs. Strath saw Barbara's perplexity, and answered it. "Lady Strath is no favourite of my son's, nor, to tell the truth, of mine either. He had the misfortune to offend her as a boy, and they have never understood each other since. There is nothing to be surprised at in that," she continued hastily, seeing how Barbara's round eyes provoked Norman. "Kindred blood does not always mean kindred minds."

"I should think Barbara would agree with you there,"

observed Norman meaningly ; " though she does seem so astonished that you don't get on well with your own sister-in-law."

" We are perfectly friendly when we meet," returned Mrs. Strath, evidently annoyed at her son's observation. " No one can ever accuse me of quarrelling, Norman, nor, as far as that goes, you either. Indeed it is rather difficult for any one to quarrel with Lady Strath : she is such a plausible, well-spoken woman."

" You are right there, mother."

" And then there are the children. One would keep peace at any hazard for their sake. I should not like my brother's children to turn against me."

" How many are there?" asked Barbara eagerly. She could not help keeping up this interesting conversation, though she saw that somehow it vexed Norman.

" Only two—a boy and a girl : Nigel and Nest. Are not those curious names? And very delicate creatures they are. We saw a great deal of them for a year or two, and then they went abroad, chiefly for Nigel's health, I believe."

" Are you so credulous as to believe that, mother?" interrupted Norman scornfully. " I think, from what we hear of Lady Strath's gay winters at Vienna and Rome, that she found England rather too dull for her pleasure-loving temperament."

" I don't know why we are always so ready to attribute unworthy motives to any on whose actions we look coldly. It is an especial failing of yours, Norman. I believe Lady Strath to be a devoted mother, to Nigel at least. I know the doctors recommended a warmer climate for him. She says in her letter to me that it has done wonders for him. He has quite thrown away his crutches, and only halts so slightly that no one would notice it."

" What is the matter with him?" asked Barbara curiously, and unmindful of the cloud on Norman's brow.

" He had an accident in his boyhood," replied Mrs. Strath, speaking very low and hurriedly, " and it resulted in sad mischief, for disease settled in the hip, and for some years he was quite lame. The strangest part is, that his sister is also very sickly. She was a fine healthy infant enough ; but all at once from no attributable cause that her mother could find out,—though I always say it must have been some carelessness on the part of her nurse—one never can tell how these things happen,—the little creature began to dwindle and pine ; and though

she was straight enough when she was born, a slight deformity betrayed itself, to the poor mother's grief."

"Well," said Barbara breathlessly.

"It was nothing very perceptible, and, from what I can hear, it has not increased. She is still very small in stature, Lady Strath writes, though a woman in years, and with one shoulder rather higher than the other; but her health has greatly improved, and by all accounts she is the same dear lovable little creature she always promised to be. When she was a child she was rather neglected—Norman thought unkindly so—by her mother, who was wholly wrapped up in Nigel. If ever woman made an idol of her child, Lady Strath did of that boy. I was afraid her over-fondness would ruin him. Boy as he was, he ruled the house."

"What sort of a looking person is Lady Strath herself?" asked Barbara.

"Rather a handsome stately-looking woman. Norman does not admire her, but that is his prejudice. She was a great beauty, I have heard, when my poor brother married her. But now, Barbara, I think I have satisfied your curiosity ten times over; and, if you please, we will leave the subject, or Norman will be cutting my tablecloth to pieces with the bread-knife."

"I beg your pardon, I am sure," replied Norman, rousing himself from the brown abstraction into which he had fallen, and wrinkling his forehead hideously in the attempt to rid it of its frown. "Well, I foolishly started the subject, and I have been obliged to pay a nice penalty this last half-hour, and now, if you will forgive my introducing a small personal matter into the present company, before we leave the table, I will just tell you, mother, what has been settled to-day. Dr. Heathcote has taken me into partnership."

"Already? without waiting for the year? Oh, Norman, I am so glad!" and Mrs. Strath laid her hand fondly on her son's—an unusual mark of affection, for those two were as unemonstrative in their daily life as ever the Heathcotes were, and, but for the night and morning kiss, Mrs. Strath's caresses were rare, and Norman's rarer still. He replied to it now with the full bright smile which came so seldom, and always lighted up the rugged, rather severe face, like sunshine on granite; but his tone betrayed real rather than assumed indifference.

"It was time I made a position for myself, and Dr. Heathcote saw that, and my services were too valuable to be lost. Oh! it is well enough; but it will be some time yet before I

can give you a home more worthy of you, *madre mia*, unless, indeed, those Spanish mines make our fortune."

"Oh, Norman, Oakleigh Cottage is good enough for me. I shall never ask for a better, till I go to my long rest. It is you who must make another and a grander home for yourself, my son, and one to which you will like to bring your wife."

What an odd sensation crossed Barbara at that moment! "Norman's wife!" it sounded strange, and yet once, and not very long ago, she had thought it would be Hester, and she fancied Mrs. Strath thought so too. Was she disappointed? was he? Barbara wondered; but no, it could never have been! Hester had only a sort of sisterly affection for him, and had said over and over again that nothing would ever induce her to be his wife. "And why not?" Barbara still soliloquised; "because he was ugly? but still he was a hundred times, nay, a thousand times, preferable to that soft-hearted Sir Geoffrey Hunsden; only he was poor, and Geoffrey was rich, was that why?"

Norman gave a conscious little laugh, and coloured all over his dark face. Barbara did not know why; but that struck her as being very funny too; perhaps he liked Hester after all!

"We will wait till my wife comes before we talk about a home for her; but mothers always will go on like that. Do I look like a marrying man, Barbara?" and he opened his keen eyes full on her, and threw back his head with a proud gesture, opening and shutting his hands nervously the while.

"I don't know," answered Barbara, with a new timidity. She was rather afraid of Norman when he looked at her like that. He seemed to compel her to answer, whether she would or not. Then, gathering fresh courage, but feeling a little queer notwithstanding: "I cannot think who she will be."

"I daresay not," returned Norman, with a strange laugh. "Time will show, time will show, Barbara." He seemed about to say something more, but checked himself, biting his lips hard.

"I wonder Hester did not have us all to dine on such a grand occasion as your partnership," said Mrs. Strath. "I shall tell her she is failing in befitting reverence. How pleased the dear doctor must have looked! Did he rub his hands a good deal, Norman? Ah! what a good friend he has been to us, my son!"

"Yes; I think we shall get on well together. The doctor has his hobbies, of course. Not every young man would put up with his old-fashioned theories nowadays."

"Old-fashioned theories!" burst out Barbara. She was up on her stilts directly. "I don't suppose there is such a clever doctor as Daddy in the whole country. I know, that great London physician, Sir Septimus Barrington, said he never met with a more sensible medical practitioner."

"Sir Septimus Barrington is an old woman, and a bit of a humbug into the bargain. They agreed, of course, because they both move in the same old-fashioned groove. We young doctors would find fault now with Sir Septimus's treatment. Look at Dr. Heathcote now!"

"Well, what about my father, Norman? I thought we had shut up shop for the night." But Norman, absorbed in his subject, scarcely heeded her.

"Look at his horror of stimulants. He is changing his mind about that though now, when he saw how I brought little Dora Evans through the diphtheria, and yet the state of mind he was in because I would give her brandy and port wine! It was a new disease then, you know, and he thought I was killing her, bringing on fever, etc.; and then he is too fond of the blister. Now Sir Septimus Barrington and he——"

"Thank you," said Barbara, rising in some displeasure, "I don't care to hear my father's professional skill impugned, even by his own partner. Mrs. Strath, it is very late, moonlight, you see; I think it is almost time for me to go home."

"Not for another half-hour or so," interposed Norman. "Finish your chat with my mother; I have a little writing to do in the study, and then I will just run up the road with you."

"There is not the slightest occasion," began Barbara stiffly; but her answer was lost on Norman, for he had left the room.

"Now you must stay, Barbara, or you will offend him; he never likes his escort refused. Here, come and sit in this cosy chair, beside me. You are tired, child. There, see how pretty our little garden looks in the moonlight!"

Barbara rested her head wearily against her friend's shoulder, and looked wistfully out at the white paths and the dark-cut shadows of the tree-tops, and then up at the purple-blue sky, where two or three flickering stars glimmered and shone, while all sorts of sweet scents seemed wandering round her in the darkness, and something pleasant and restful stirred at her heart.

"Sleepy, Barbara?"

"No, only thinking—dreaming rather—I thought I saw my dead mother's eyes shining on me through that intense blue—wonderful starlike eyes full of love—and when you hold me in this way it always lulls me into silence ; I seem to feel her arms round me warm and tight like yours."

"Poor child !"

"I have an odd motherless feeling sometimes, Mrs. Strath. She was not unlike you—does that make me love you so ?"

"Do you love me, little Barbara ?"

"Ay, dearly, dearly. I prop up myself against your restful age ; I want no young friend—no girl friends, I mean, of my own age when I have you. You see I tell you all my thoughts."

"Heaven bless you, dear."

"Why was Norman so bitter when we talked just now, Mrs. Strath ? Why did he look so grave and angry when you mentioned his aunt ?"

"What, curious again, and back on the old subject ? Well, I suppose I must satisfy you, but you must never tell any one—not even Norman—that you know."

"Of course not," exclaimed Barbara indignantly ; "I can keep a secret better than most people."

"It is not much of a secret, my dear, only being rather painful, Norman does not like to have it known. When Norman and Nigel were boys, they were a great deal together. Nigel was devoted to his cousin, and Norman was more with him than at home. I am sorry to say my boy had, or rather I should say has, a passionate temper, and Nigel was dreadfully spoiled, capricious, and uncertain, even to those he loved ; it was very trying to Norman's high-spirited nature, and the lads had many disputes together, each wanting their own way, and neither willing to yield ; and it did not much mend matters that Lady Strath always came to her son's rescue—taking his part, justly or unjustly, as the case might be.

"They were having a terrible quarrel one day, and their high words reaching Lady Strath's ears, she ran as usual to separate them, and overwhelm her own boy with entreaties and caresses ; and Norman would not stand it. Nigel was in the wrong—decidedly in the wrong, and would not give up what he had in his hand ; some money I think it was. He continued to refuse, encouraged by his mother's presence ; and Norman, advancing to wrest it out of his hand, received a violent box on the ears from Lady Strath. It was so severe a

blow that he reeled, and was almost stunned; he quite staggered back, and then, his furious temper maddened by injustice, he wrenched the gold out of Nigel's hand, driving him before him, and dealing with him so roughly, that in the scuffle—they were on the nursery landing—he pushed him, as Lady Strath declares—Norman says he fell—from the top of the stairs to the bottom, and he fell on his hip.

“He was a delicate boy, and sore mischief resulted from that fall. Lady Strath, who had never in her heart liked Norman, was fearfully incensed against him, and worked herself up to such a pitch of resentment that she would not see or speak to him for a twelvemonth; and though Nigel was eager to be reconciled to his old playmate, and took most of the blame of the quarrel on himself, she would not suffer the lads to meet till just before they left England. There now, Barbara, you have the pith of the whole matter; run and put on your hat, for I hear Norman moving in his study.”

“But I thought you said Lady Strath and you never quarrelled,” persisted Barbara, in her obstinate way.

“No more we do; neither did we at the time. His aunt's resentment (he never gives her the title of Aunt, Barbara) seemed wholly directed against Norman, and we always maintained an outward friendliness towards each other, but it was not sincere—I sided with my boy, and resented her harsh treatment of him in my heart, though, for the children's sake—my poor Hugh's children—I tried hard to keep the peace; but there, you chatterbox, I will not say another word about it: Norman will be dreadfully annoyed if he knows you have wheedled it out of me.”

CHAPTER VIII.

BAB FINDS A VISITOR AT DORT'S MILL.

“Would I were secretary to your thoughts.”

EDWARD PHILLIPS, NEPHEW OF MILTON.

“BARBARA, are you very busy this evening?”

“No, not very. Wait till I have finished this piece of shading, and then I will attend to you.” And Bab shook the brown tangle out of her eyes, not unlike the way in which a terrier does, and went on with her drawing.

Hester was lying on the couch in the Harlequin room, looking worn and delicate indeed. The faintness and headache which Barbara had treated so lightly that evening at Mrs. Strath's had resulted in complete prostration. She had never been quite strong since that long illness so many years ago, when she had turned her face to the wall and wept those sore salt tears for her dead lover. Her strength often flagged, as it did now, and any excitement made her nerves irritable. Barbara had rightly conjectured when in her sagacious way she had said to herself that it was this odd connection with Geoffrey Hunsden that was fretting her into an illness.

He had been here this evening, and had blundered and talked her into a fever. But she had been just as gentle with him as ever; and now he was gone she lay with closed eyes, trying to hide from Bab's scrutiny the tears that would keep brimming over them. She had the old heartache so bitterly this evening.

Barbara had devoted herself to her sister most certainly with a will, but in a thoroughly Barbara-like—or, as Leigh termed it, Barbaric—manner; that is, she had worked heartily and well, managing to insinuate in every other sentence, by word or tone, that Hester was herself three parts to blame for her illness, and Connie the other part; while she, Barbara herself, was decidedly the good-humoured victim of their mismanagement. Hester, always unusually gentle in illness, swallowed the innuendoes, and accepted Bab's fussy little services with gratitude, and it was in a tone of unusual deference that she prefaced her remarks on this evening. Kindness begets kindness. Bab answered pleasantly, and then bent her shaggy little head over what was considered a striking likeness of Ben; while Ben himself, stretched at the feet of the young artist, regarded her out of the corner of one red eye, the other winking and blinking the while in a state of semi-somnolence.

Barbara sucked her pencil meditatively, and considered him. "There, I think I've done you justice, you beauty; but you must give me another sitting. Now I am ready, Essie; what do you want with me?"

"It is such a lovely evening, Barbara, and you have not been out to-day. Do you think Ben and you could execute a little commission for me at Dort's mill?"

"Ben and I are quite at your service. But Connie is out, and you will be all alone, Hester."

"Oh, I don't mind that," returned Hester hastily. But

she did not add—are we not all addicted to mental reservations?—that she was longing, pining to be alone with her own sad thoughts, and that the errand was a harmless little manœuvre to get Barbara out of the room—Barbara, who would whistle, and hum, and laugh in a breath. “Indeed, I don’t mind being alone. Sir Geoffrey has tired me and made my head ache. I wish you would not encourage him to make such a noise, Barbara.”

“I thought I was saving you the trouble of talking,” returned Barbara, rather crest-fallen. How she had made Sir Geoffrey laugh to be sure!

“Well, well,” interrupted Hester, with something of her old fretfulness; “it was only your want of tact, I suppose. But now about your errand, Hillyard has never sent up that sack of flour I ordered, and it is baking-day to-morrow.”

“Why I thought Leigh offered to call at the mill as he passed this evening,” said Barbara doubtfully. “I know he told you so.”

“What nonsense,” answered her sister. “What has Leigh got to do with domestic matters? I never knew him offer to do an errand for me before, and if he did he would be sure to forget it before the day was over.”

“Very well, then, I will walk over; and perhaps I shall go on towards Briarsley to meet him. He said he should be late to-night.”

“Do as you like,” returned Hester wearily, and closing her eyes; a hint on which Barbara immediately acted by calling to Ben in a loud whisper, slamming the door noisily, and then, in her contrition, opening and shutting it like a mouse, after which she scuttled across the hall, and raced Ben three steps at a time, to the tune of clanging doors and joyous whistling, to which latter harmony Ben kept dubious time by the thumping of his heavy tail against the floor.

Barbara had rather chafed against her indoor life, and was wild to be out in the air. She had been longing over and over again to pay a second visit to Dort’s Mill, but Hester’s illness had prevented her; now, however, she had leave and license to enjoy herself to the full this lovely evening. The air was so soft, the road so white and crisp, and the hedgerows so full of tangled loveliness that Barbara could not contain herself for glee; her feet would go dancing along with springy steps; Norman, tying up his horse to the paling of a roadside cottage, took off his hat to her gravely enough as she passed, and then

stood watching the child-figure and the little twinkling feet that were literally flitting over the daisy grass.

Barbara left off her dance now, and began looking up with wistful eyes to the summer blue above, where long white clouds were trailing and coiling their lengths like snow serpents, some with silver scales or ragged fringes of gold.

How sweetly the birds were singing their evening hymns. How strangely the harsh clanging of the rooks and the pert call of the cuckoo seemed to blend with the softer notes. What a black blue the firs were to-night, and what a sullen red gloom was in their depths, mingled here and there with crimson fire, where the first sunset rays smote between their straight stems. "One rarely sees pictures of pine-woods," thought Barbara, as she stood still leaning on the low wooden paling; "artists seem fonder of painting oaks and beeches, and all the warped and gnarled old parents of the wood. They seize on grotesque forms—at least Gustave Doré does—trees that look a tragedy in themselves. Now, if I could paint well—which I must and will—I would have nothing but fir-woods, with perhaps a solitary figure; a granddame in her red cloak, or a boy gathering faggots; a group of children gathered round a dead squirrel, or perhaps a pair of lovers. Sometimes I would have no figures at all; nothing but that distance and colouring. Look at its burning crimson, as if the pines were on fire. Or perhaps I would paint what I love better still—the soft green gloom of a summer's afternoon—weird, still, profound; some people call it the blue shadow of the firs. They are colour-blind; it is green, or yellowish-green; it is exquisite. All sorts of still shadows seem abroad. One could fancy some gentle bloodless ghost gliding from stem to stem. Ah! what hours you and I have spent, Ben, lying on the dead bracken there, and dreaming wonderful dreams. We don't live, Ben; life has not come to us yet, but we have a glorious kingdom of our own in dream-land."

"There," continued Bab, still in the same quiet soliloquy, "there is the spot where I picked up Winnie. And now we must have a race to the very door of Dort's Mill, Ben. Stop there; twenty yards in advance is your mistress's privilege; now—one, two, three, and we're off."

Ben was off decidedly, and had scoured the lane in the twinkling of an eye; while Bab, light of foot but panting for breath, ran and trotted and hopped after him, and then stood fanning her heated face against the doorpost of Dort's Mill.

"Now be a gentleman and lie still, Ben, till I come back." And Bab, opening the gate, found herself with an odd feeling of pleasure among the apple-trees, beehives, and thymy borders of the old mill garden.

The little hall was empty as hitherto, but she could hear Winnie's chirruping voice somewhere in the outer premises as she knocked at the kitchen door.

There was a little hesitation, a silence, and then the same clear voice said, "Come in," and Bab entering found herself in the great sunny kitchen with its bowery lattices, the baby as before creeping and gurgling on the hearth; only there was a difference this evening—Bab was not the only visitor. There was a tall young man leaning against the open lattice, who turned round when she spoke. It was Leigh.

There was a slight flush on his face at Barbara's loud spoken exclamation. But nothing could exceed the carelessness of his lounge, the gay indifference of his laugh; it was Leigh all over.

"So it is you, Babette, is it? And on the same errand I'll be bound. Did I not tell you, Miss Canham, that they would be sure not to trust my memory, and that another messenger would follow at my heels? Nevertheless, the sack of flour is on its way, Dame Muffet."

"I told Hester you would order it," returned Barbara, mightily perplexed, and quite unable to account for the curious feeling of discomfort that crossed her; and then, not knowing exactly what to say, she took the seat to which Ruth had mutely pointed. It was strange, and yet of course quite natural to find Leigh here; but then, why had he not given his message at the mill itself, and to one of the men? Why was he so comfortably ensconced in the sunny kitchen, and looking quite at home in it? Was it curiosity to see the new schoolmistress whom she and Hester had so highly vaunted that had led him there? If so, she wished she had bitten out her careless little tongue before she had told her foolish tale to him.

How handsome he looked too, "handsome Gipsy Leigh," as they called him; and what a saucy care-for-nothing expression there was in his dark eyes as he lounged against the window frame, pulling some rose leaves to pieces between his idle fingers, and tossing back his hair from his forehead in a careless way he had. Barbara felt an odd twinge of pain. "Why are you here?" she asked, in her honest blunt way; and then she looked at Ruth. She had scarcely raised her eyes since Barbara entered. She was at work in her old place, with

her restless foot moving the rocker of the empty cradle in the same absent manner ; but this evening she was not pale. There was a beautiful changing colour on her face, and something of suppressed restlessness in her whole mien. She was handsomer than ever, Barbara was obliged to own.

"Oh, why are you here?" faltered the little sister, quite unable to explain her own dismay.

Leigh gave one of his light laughs, and aimed a rose-leaf pellet at her.

"Why am I here?" he repeated carelessly. "That 'why' is easily accounted for, Barbara, since Paul Hillyard was out, no men about the premises, so I made bold to come up to the mill kitchen and entrust my message to Miss Canham." He gave her a quick look as he spoke. "Miss Canham and I are old acquaintances. Rolf and I have been down to the school once or twice, and had no end of a lark ; and as you came in, the sack of flour having been despatched, we were talking about a plan of mine for giving the children a lecture."

"A lecture ! Are you serious, Leigh ?"

"Why not ? How grave you look, Barbara. Why should I not turn my time and talents to account if I like, though it is only to please dunces of children ? We were just having a warm dispute when you tapped at the door. I wanted something scientific—solar system, meteors, or natural history ; and Ruth," he bit his lip, "Miss Canham, was all for amusement and a magic-lantern."

"A lecture ! oh, it's all right then," blurted out Barbara, and she drew a long breath of relief.

"What's all right, and what do you mean, little mystery?" returned Leigh in a surprised tone, and with elevated eyebrows ; but Ruth, quicker of comprehension, coloured down to the tips of her fingers, and bent lower over her work. Leigh gave her another of his keen watchful looks, and rattled on. "I recommended we should toss up, but Miss Canham referred me to the vicar. Won't it be fun ? You'll help me on the platform, Bab, and we'll have the whole village gaping and staring at us."

"I think Ruth's idea much the wiser," said Barbara, roused at last to interest, and speaking more like her old self. "Who ever heard of astronomical lectures for small school children ? You would want diagrams and all sorts of things besides, and then they would not understand a word. No, the magic-lantern by all means."

"Yes, I think it will be best," said Ruth, forcing herself to

speak ; "but we must talk to the vicar about it, he may not like the expense ; but as I told your brother, it is of no use starting the subject yet, for the children are going to have their summer treat, and a magic-lantern is only fit for the winter."

"True, I forgot," replied Leigh confusedly ; "there is no occasion for us to discuss the matter just now. What a hot evening it is," he continued in a fatigued tone, "and how much I should like a glass of that excellent cider that my sister praised so, if I might ask such a favour." And he threw himself down in the wooden rocking-chair in an easy good-humoured way, and snapped his fingers at the baby, who chirruped and crawled towards him.

Ruth rose with a heightened colour and left the room, calling to Winnie as she did so.

"I think you are very free and easy, Leigh, and make yourself very much at home everywhere," said Bab, wondering ; but Leigh only laughed and snapped his fingers the louder.

"Come here, you young sir, Issachar, Jacob, whatever's your name—I know it's Biblical. Oh, you want to come up, do you ? Well, come along," and Leigh hoisted the fair laughing boy on to his knee. "Now, what's the next proceeding ?"

The next proceeding was decidedly uninviting ; some moist and coal-begrimed fingers scrabbled delightedly over his face, and a dimpled fist was thrust lovingly into his eye.

"Oh, Naphtali, Naphtali !" groaned Leigh, emerging with roughened head and blinking eyes, "you have taken honours, I should think, in infantine prize-fighting, or you would never have darkened my sky-light in one round in that highly scientific manner."

The baby crowed and stamped with its rosy curled-up feet, gurgling deliciously with infantine babbings and mutterings. Barbara thought she had never seen anything so pretty. Perhaps Ruth thought so too ; for, after she had given Leigh the cider and sat down to her work, her eyes dwelt upon the babe with sweet pathetic lingerings, and something seemed to thaw her proud reserve ; and when by and by, exhausted with its joy, it had fallen asleep on Leigh's knee, all of a heap as kittens do, she stretched out her arms, smiling and yearning for the boy, with all a woman's worship stamped on her fair face.

What is this worship, this adoration instinctive and profound, that agitates the true woman at the shrine of purity and helplessness ; this love, all giving, selfless, asking for no return, common alike to the married and the unmarried, maid or matron,

down to the confines of old age, strong as death, bordering even the grave itself?

Agony of maternity, fond worshipping love, bowing low before embodied innocence, from the time when the Jewish women, strong in their hopes of giving a Messiah to the world, cried out, with loving impulsive Rachel, "Give me children, or I die," to the day when the Blessed Maid hung worshipping and adoring over her wondrous Babe, even to the present day, yea, till this old worn world shall totter blindly to its close—women, wedded or unwedded, shall offer their sweet incense at the feet of unconscious purity, sometimes with hungry longing, sometimes with full fruition before these fragile lilies of the earth. Ah! loving womanly hearts that crave and are not satisfied, He that "took up the young children in His arms to bless them," who "set a little child in the midst," shall He not freely give you all things? for "more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord."

Something of this instinctive worship revealed itself in the tender shining of Ruth's eyes, as she stooped over the baby with outstretched arms. "He is asleep," she said, with all sorts of gentle hushes in her voice. "Look how his small pink foot has nestled itself in your hand; let me take him and lay him in his cradle;" but Leigh refused.

"No, no; let him be till we go. What is his name? Reuben? I thought it was Dan or Zebulon. What a fine little fellow he is! and look how he is smiling in his sleep!"

"Where is Winnie all this time?" asked Barbara. She was sitting apart from them, looking out into the shadowy orchard with dreamy far-away eyes. Ruth came and sat by her.

"Anna is putting her to bed; she has been in fine mischief in the poultry-yard, and was not fit to appear, though she was all anxiety to see the big doggie's little lady, as she calls you. Are you tired, Miss Heathcote? I fancy you are; or are you looking at the young moon just rising behind the great apple-tree?"

"I believe I am a little tired," said Barbara slowly; "but I was not looking at the moon or anything in particular." "She thinks I am quiet and strange to-night," thought Bab to herself. "Perhaps I am; I can't make her out; I can't make any one out. I believe her silence disappoints me." As though guessing her thought, Ruth fixed her great brown eyes full on her; their wistfulness startled Barbara.

"We are all quiet to-night; you are, Miss Heathcote, and

I know I am; one has the heartache so sorely at times." Then hastily, as if she feared any misconception of her meaning: "I have been thinking of my old home a great deal this evening."

"Dairymead Farm, you mean?"

"Yes, dear old Dairymead. Naomi and Paul have gone there to-day. To-morrow it will pass into other hands, the old homestead that has gone from father to son for seventy years or more."

"Was your father a farmer?" The question came from Leigh, but she answered as though it were Barbara.

"I believe you would call him a yeoman, Miss Heathcote. It was only a slip of a farm, but well stocked with cattle. The dairy was our special pride. It was a sore trial to Naomi to leave it, and such a beautiful dairy it was too, the largest and best room in the house. Reuben—that was our brother—had made a pretty little spring bubble and play out of the stone floor; and often and often have I taken my work of a summer's afternoon and sat listening to the little cool splashes, and thought I could not find a pleasanter place in a king's palace—dear old Dairymead!"

"Was Reuben the brother who went away?" It was Leigh again who spoke, but her face was turned towards Barbara.

"Yes, Naomi and I lived with him, till Paul Hillyard came to Dairymead and married Naomi."

"How very strange!" began Barbara; and then she stopped awkwardly enough.

"What was very strange, Miss Heathcote?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, at least," she stammered, in her downright honest truth, which was at once Barbara's greatest virtue and failing too; "it was only that I could not help thinking it strange that Paul Hillyard should choose your sister, and not you."

Ruth coloured exceedingly, whether from the implied compliment or because the words jarred upon her, was not easy to know. Leigh came to her rescue, though with a touch of displeasure in his voice that Barbara was not slow to perceive.

"You must not mind my sister's abrupt speeches—nobody does who knows her; it is one of Bab's idiosyncrasies—of which she has as many as a philosopher—that men only choose their wives for good looks, and not for such superfluous articles as good temper, hidden worth, etc. One of these days she will find herself mistaken when somebody chooses her."

Barbara reddened and looked annoyed. Ruth answered very gently:

"No one need be surprised at Paul marrying Naomi, though he was the handsomest man in the parish, and she such a pale sickly creature; for Naomi has that which is above beauty, and makes him an excellent wife—they are very united."

"And you like being at Dort's Mill?"

"Yes, dearly, I am very happy—too happy sometimes, I fear, or else I dream that I am."

"There are some dreams that know no waking; that will be yours. Barbara, are you ready? I think it is time that we go home."

"Yes, I am ready," said Barbara, rousing herself. "Time? why it is full moonlight."

"But you will come again, Miss Heathcote; say that you will come when I am alone—on a Wednesday evening. Naomi is always out then, and we will have a long quiet talk together." And Ruth held her hand warmly—almost caressingly.

"Wednesday? you can come any other evening, can't you, Barbara?" Why such an impatient voice, Leigh?

"Oh yes," answered Barbara readily; but Ruth interrupted her:

"No, I would rather it were Wednesday. Please do not disappoint me, Miss Heathcote."

"Oh no, I will not. Next Wednesday then; Hester will be all right by that time. Good-bye, Ruth, give my love to the 'tittle shrimp.'"

"Good-bye, Miss Canham." Leigh hesitated, then offered his hand; it touched hers—oh, so slightly.

Barbara lingered by the gate to caress Ben.

"Wait a moment, Bab, I have left my gloves in the mill kitchen I believe—yes, what a careless fellow I am. Walk on slowly, and I will overtake you in another minute."

"Very well," said Bab, and then she walked on meditating—"What a queer world it is," said Bab to herself, "why cannot I make up my mind about Ruth Canham? She is good—she is beautiful, but she is not what I thought her; is it that that disappoints me, I wonder? Last time I fell headlong in love with her, Naomi, and everything; this evening I felt odd, suspicious, out-of-sorts, and she saw it." The rest of Bab's soliloquy was cut short by Leigh's step behind her, as he came up panting and flushed with exercise.

"Well, Babchen, what a pace you go; it's Wednesday, is it?"

"Yes," said Barbara, linking her arm in his, and turning her face eagerly towards him. "Well, what do you think of my new friend?"

"Your new friend?—excuse me, Bab, but I can't help laughing; what queer creatures you women are to be sure. You see each other, exchange a few words, stare each other out of countenance, then with a gush of sentiment swear eternal friendship 'till death do us part,' and all that sort of thing, you know, which lasts a few weeks, or months perhaps, till another sweet creature turns up, and then it's off with the old love and on with the new."

"You disagreeable old cynic, why that burst of philosophy?"

"I could not help it; your expression provoked it. But seriously, Barbara, I do honestly admire your lack of pride in choosing a friend so below your own station; there's something noble in it—you are a superb little radical, Bab."

"I don't know," remarked Barbara modestly. "I can't see any merit in what is obviously so right. Why should there not be a freemasonry between women as between men—sex and virtue levelling disparity of rank and fortune. For myself I disclaim those old-world prejudices. I would as willingly make a friend of the postman's daughter as of a Duchess, if she were refined as well as good."

"And I admire you for it," repeated Leigh eagerly.

Something in his tone reminded Barbara of the imprudence of avowing such sentiments to one always ready to overlook the distinctions of caste, and with some inward trepidation she endeavoured to modify her last speech.

"I was sure you would approve of my new friend, or whatever you call her, and could not but be alive to her general superiority in tone and manner. It is all right for me, you know, to express these sentiments of fraternity and equality with my own sex, but it does not hold good in your case; it would never do for you, you know, to be dawdling up at Dort's Mill—it would have an odd look, to say the least of it, and be very bad taste besides."

"Who said I intended visiting at Dort's Mill?" began Leigh angrily; then checking himself—"I suppose you're a little chatterbox, Babchen—all women are—but if you go and make a fuss about it at home, that's your affair, it's nothing to

me, remember. A pretty thing it would be if it were spread about in the village that Dr. Heathcote's son was seen dawdling about the mill."

"That is what I say," remonstrated Barbara; "that is exactly why I recommended prudence, because people will talk, of course. I don't mean to treat Hester to a *résumé* of this evening—a pretty fuss she would make about it."

"Come, that's right; you are a sensible little soul, Barbara. You know," he continued coaxingly, "it was all an accident, the men were away from the mill—the water-power low, I suppose—so I just stepped up to the house; and your being there made me stop on—I thought there could be no harm in it."

"There was none, I hope; I was only recommending caution for the future; but what did you think of Ruth?" she added cunningly. "Did my description hold good?"

"You mean about her eyes; well, they are rather like a cow's—large and plaintive, as you said. Oh, she is well enough—handsome, of course," he added carelessly; "one never expects those large women to be very graceful in their movements."

"Why, Leigh!" cried Barbara, disappointed at this captious criticism, "I can't think how you can have the heart or inclination to find fault with such a beautiful creature."

"Well, she is beautiful," admitted Leigh reluctantly; "but one could see in a moment that she had not learnt deportment in a dancing-school. She has too much dignity to be awkward; but she rather lumbered across the room, I thought, and she did not hold her head well."

Barbara gazed at him in speechless surprise. There was a little vein of humour underlying Leigh's remark that seemed to detract from any covert inconsistency. There was a hot sparkle in his eye besides. Barbara could not make him out at all.

"Well, well," she returned impatiently, "did you find your gloves when you went back?"

"My gloves!" said Leigh confusedly. "Ah! my gloves—I remember. We looked for them, but they were lying snugly in my pocket all the time."

CHAPTER IX.

BARBARA ENACTS THE PART OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

“Kindness in women, not their beauteous looks,
Shall win my love.”—SHAKESPEARE.

“BEN, Ben, do you hear me, sir? come here directly!”

Ben, who was burrowing delightedly in a dry grassy ditch, flapped his tail disconsolately at the peremptory word of command, and came up, his head very much on one side and his great curly ears drooping visibly.

“Ben, Ben,” said Bab, flicking him playfully with the little hazel switch she carried in her hand, “what do you mean by hunting rabbits, sir? Do you know St. Ronans will shoot you for a poacher! and then poor Bab will cry and never be comforted for her four-legged friend;” and rather overpowered by this picture her imagination had conjured up, Bab knelt down, and, gathering the great black head in her arms, kissed the glossy forehead—caresses in which Ben would willingly have joined with many grateful slobbers; but fearing another rebuke from his little mistress, he contented himself with placing his bushy paws upon her shoulders, a proceeding which invariably knocked her down. “Now you’ve been and gone and done it, you bad dog; and rumpled my clean muslin the first time I’ve put it on,” said Bab, as she rose from the ground with a flushed face, and contemplated the creases ruefully. “What will Hester say to me, I wonder? Come now, do let us be sensible, Ben. I am tired of racing and being thrown down. Come and sit by me among this delicious bracken;” and Bab, untying her hat, nestled quietly down into her ferny nook; while Ben, obedient and watchful as a sentinel, reared himself up behind her, and sat grinning down at her with his red tongue hanging lovingly out of his mouth.

And Bab sat among the tall green bracken and looked out on the blue blackness of the firs around her, and down the long aisle, where a slanting bar of sunset glory heralded the fires of declining day; and then up at one golden cloud that lay folded in light, like the hem of a seraph’s robe, and her heart seemed full of reflected beauty, stirred with strange yearnings—movements of expectant bliss.

Bab was never truer to herself than when alone—when removed from the jarring circumstances of daily life—from contact with minds that certainly failed to assimilate with hers, she was brought face to face with nature; its mighty pulse beating within her heart, stirring it with its wonderful truth, its perfection of form, its unspoken revelations; waking in her responsive symphonies that startled her with their very sweetness, rousing her to new efforts of thought and filling her with a thousand vague sensations of love and awe that made her seek—child-woman as she was—for beauty within beauty, the Creator amid the created.

“What is truth!” alas! how many doubtful ones groping in the realms of reason by the light of Nature, have demanded that question of the ages moving in their myriad revolutions within the cycle of eternity, and have had their question flung back relentlessly at the feet of their invincible ignorance, seeing that they sought it by the miserable torchlight of science in the very face of Truth itself. “What is truth?” Ah! blind led by the blind—searching for the philosopher’s stone in the pitiless dust of humanity, look up from the skeletons of the past, the paltry dreams of the future, to where the rent veil reveals the Holy of Holies!

Oh, Truth! so simple that a little child can lead thee. Oh, mystery! so mighty that human intellect faints and expires at thy feet; when shall this Babel of human reason and materialistic wisdom fall shattered before one pierced Hand, holding in its bleeding palm the lamp of truth!

Barbara, in her defective womanhood, her imperfect knowledge, asked this question of herself, seeking it in her own heart and in the revealed beauties of Nature, groping for it darkly amid the outward and visible forms of a religion whose inward sacramental graces were as yet sealed to her. She beat and baffled herself, poor child, on the waves of a troublesome world, now rising, now falling with every change of wind and circumstance, pelted sadly by many a bitter salt-sea wave, tossed wearily by many an ungoverned impulse, clinging to waifs and strays and such like weak supports that wrecked and went to pieces in her hand; while all the time the church, with its open portals, floated like an ark of refuge, close to her, its tender charities reaching out helpful hands to the wilful mariner.

In talking thus of Barbara, I am reminded of a picture I have once seen—a mere sketch, the world would pass it by;

but it is simple, touching, mightily suggestive of the things that belong to our peace. Nothing but a stretch of sea and sky, a few dark rippling waves—slight indications of a stormy cloud or two—a figure mediæval, devout, kneeling on a simple raft, a rough-hewn wooden cross that carries her safely through waves and tempest, contrary winds and heavenly calms, to the haven where she would be.

But Barbara, like many another, had not reached the cross. She had to grope her way to it, as Mrs. Strath so justly remarked, through the long darkness of pain.

On such an evening as this, soft and profoundly calm, when daylight and sunset seem to commingle in glorious coloured fires of crimson, purple, and gold, veiling the west, Barbara's thoughts would surge unbidden, circling all sorts of weird abysses and fervent Paradisiacal heights; odd imaginary doubts, singular dreams, and dreamlike realities coursing each other through her hot busy brain while she looked out on the horizon, lending its blue distance so enchantingly to her eyes.

This seething mixture of thought frothed over her whole life, unsettling its intent and purpose, for her dreams did not match her realities, nor her realities her dreams; hence, discontent was the result. She would not fit herself in her home place; its narrowness fretted her. She chafed at the barrier sex and circumstance had put before her, she, who was made for better and for higher things—what things Barbara could not have exactly specified; but yesterday and to-day the impulse had seized her that she must be an artist. She had always loved form and colouring; her pencil and crayon had been her delight from childhood, and her execution was by no means despicable; indeed the efforts of her crude and untaught genius had often surprised the home circle, meagre judges as they were in all things pertaining to art. It was Norman Strath who first perceived the dawns of her power, and took pity on her wasted strength; and Barbara had been made very happy to-day, for her father had bade her show Norman all her unfinished sketches—her odd designs and pencilled-out thoughts—and Norman had been quite unable to suppress his expressions of surprise and admiration.

“Barbara design this! then Barbara is a self-taught artist; and it is a sin and a shame to let a talent like this rust for want of a little training. You must give her some lessons, Dr. Heathcote.” So spoke keen-sighted Norman, the man who admired so little—who so rarely praised, and his eyes had

looked at her for a moment with an unusual deference and respect. Barbara felt her ambitious little heart swell at this recognition of her power. Speechless, blushing, almost timidly, she had received the first spoken homage of mind to mind ; but it sank down into her heart never to be forgotten ; and then she had rushed off to share her joy with Mrs. Strath, and having made this her safety-valve for her intense feelings of pride and happiness, she had treated Ben to a race in the fir-woods, stimulated almost childishly by this sudden influx of sunshine.

"I will be an artist ; yes, now I will be an artist," said Bab ; and then in her happy day-dream she planned herself a studio, a real studio, with carved cabinets and wonderful scraps of gorgeous colouring, Indian scarfs, tapestry, and ruby velvet curtains, curious articles of bric-a-brac, and ormolu, a studio fit for a princess.

Revelling in this imaginary picture, Barbara had just stationed herself, palette in hand, before her easel, with Leigh as her first sitter, when the quick brushing of footsteps through the underwood suddenly recalled her to real life again. The fir plantations, or pine-woods, as Bab called them, bordered on the Brackley Road, and in reality belonged to the house they called St. Ronans, or St. Ronans' Hall, as it was properly, but the old place, owing to family misfortunes, having passed into the hands of strange owners, who had again put it up to auction, it had been for a long time left deserted, and except in nutting and blackberry seasons, Barbara and Ben had the old woods much to themselves, and it was therefore with a sensation of curiosity, not wholly unmixed with fear, that Barbara listened to the firm crunching of the stranger's footsteps sounding nearer and nearer. That Ben shared her suspicions was clear by the way in which he reared himself on his haunches, and listened with cocked ear and a most ominous growl, which deepened into thorough bass, as a young man, in a shooting coat, appeared in sight, his gun thrown carelessly over his shoulder.

"Hush, Ben, hush ! why I do believe it is St. Ronans himself," and Barbara's little hands held Ben's black muzzle, in such dread of an outbreak, that she was able only to take a most cursory view of the young sportsman, though he walked slowly and looked curiously at them both as he passed, and then she leant forward eagerly, and looked after him till his footsteps sounded out of sight. "It is St. Ronans," said Barbara to her-

self; "I am certain of it. Now I wish I could have observed him more closely; it was all Ben's fault, for I know he looked at us enough as he passed. How well he walked, not a bit lame, though I fancied afterwards there was a slight limp, a very slight limp—a sort of drag of one foot; and how well he carried his head, rather haughtily I thought. He is not so tall as Leigh—no, not nearly; but I wish I had seen more of his face, it was good-looking, I think, and rather pale. Good heavens!" Barbara's exclamation was called forth by the sudden report of a gun, which seemed to go off quite near them, and to which Ben responded by a most angry growl.

"I don't call that gentlemanly," said Barbara, turning rather pale with her start. "He ought not to have let off that gun so near us; it is not safe, and it enrages Ben so. Why, he is hardly out of sight yet, and can scarcely have reached the little gate by the bracken path; perhaps he did it out of mischief, to give Ben and me a fright—it was very wrong," and Bab stood doubtful for a moment; for, in common with many of her sex, this small woman had a great horror of guns.

She wanted to find her way out of this twilight wood, its spell was broken for the nonce by the intruder's step, but it had only one outlet, the gate by the bracken path; the other gate, which was at the farther end of the plantations, led into the shrubberies and lawns of St. Ronans. Bab stood and hesitated. What strange beings we human creatures are; at certain crises of our life all sorts of instincts and presentiments seem to propel us on and on contrary to our will,—nay, sometimes contrary to our own rightful sense, till we are fain to abandon the rudder and oars that we hitherto used, and follow an invisible guide which may haply turn out a mere Will-o'-the-wisp, to engulf us to our own destruction, and yet often in this way we have entertained angels unawares.

Barbara never knew what curious instinct made her follow that formidable gun, and in spite of nervous fears, led her to exchange her safe retreat for the dangers of the bracken path; she only paced along in her little old-fashioned dignity, and trusted devoutly that Providence would protect her.

Just where the wood ends and the open ground begins, there was a white gate, and an old stunted tree trunk beside it. Barbara coming out from the firs, was almost tempted to seek their cover again, when she saw the young sportsman she had styled St. Ronans sitting on the trunk beside the gate. There was a quick contest between dignity and cowardice, and then

dignity prevailed, and Barbara made good her advance ; she would have a good look at him as she passed, and as she came up her eyes opened wide for the purpose, but at the first glance dignity, cowardice, reserve, were all forgotten, and she had sprung to his side with a loud uttered exclamation that most women use when in great dismay ; for she had caught sight of one hand streaming with blood.

"Good heavens !" came again involuntarily from her lips, and then she hid her eyes a moment from the ghastly sight.

The young man raised his head and looked at her ; his face was very white, as though with pain, and he bit his lip hard to suppress a groan, but he eyed her keenly for all that.

"I have shot myself, that's all ; as I was getting over the stile the gun went off in my hand ; there's no use calling out ; if you wish to help me, give me a handkerchief, please."

The tone was irritable, peremptory. Barbara, in spite of her fear, found time to wonder at it.

"I have two handkerchiefs, but they are very small," said Barbara, dragging them forth with feverish haste.

"Well, mine is a large one," said the young man impatiently ; "it's no use talking, you know, while I am bleeding to death—if I had any one but a girl to help me !" he added, in a tone of despair. "I can't bind it up with one hand ; you must do it for me."

The *must* acted on Barbara's weak nerves like magic ; she was standing by him, shaking in every limb, and quite as white as he was ; the sight of blood was terrible to Barbara.

"I will try," she said faintly, and it really spoke well for her courage ; true, she shrank back once when she first touched the wounded limb, it was mangled so hideously, but she did her task well, though tremblingly, with little odd catches in her breath every now and then.

"I think that will do," she said, looking up at him ; he was leaning back against the gate with his eyes closed and his nether lip bitten in painfully, but he roused himself up at her voice.

"Is it done ? you have been a long time about it ; are you sure you have bandaged it tightly enough—there is the knot coming undone."

"I will tie it again," returned Barbara meekly ; "leave it to me, please." He looked so deadly faint that she forgave his impatience and irritability, though she was doing her best for him.

"I wish I could get you a little water, but there is no cottage near. If you can walk, you must come with me to a doctor, unless I fetch him here—but no, it will never do to leave you alone; it is not far, do you think you could get to Dr. Heathcote's?"

"I must, or I shall have lock-jaw setting in. Stay, which is the nearer, Dr. Heathcote's or St. Ronans?"

"Oh, Dr. Heathcote's. You have only to go down the bracken path, through two little fields, and into the Brackley Road, and the lane is just opposite."

"Then I will try, if you will lend me your arm."

"My shoulder, rather," said Barbara, with a little nervous laugh—her teeth quite chattered as she spoke. "I am so little, you see. But stay, I must contrive a sling for your hand; it must not hang down like that. Can you give me off that silk handkerchief?" she added, pointing timidly to the blue handkerchief he wore knotted loosely round his throat; he pulled it off hastily, and handed it to her, and she soon contrived a more comfortable rest.

He watched her hasty movements without a word, save a brief "thank you," the first he had said yet, and then rose feebly from his seat, hesitating a moment, as though scarcely able to move.

"Open the gate, Ben," said Barbara decidedly, and then she took the young man's hand; she was doing everything unconsciously, and with the most utter forgetfulness of self, and placed it firmly on her shoulder. "Lean hard—use me as a walking-stick; I am strong though I am so little."

The first glimmer of a smile came to his eyes as he moved slowly along, but it speedily died away in his increasing faintness.

"Any other man would be able to bear up against a little pain," he muttered discontentedly; "but I am a bad subject for it—it is this confounded faintness that I can't fight against," and he grasped Barbara's shoulder so tightly that she with difficulty suppressed a little cry of pain.

"How does the hand feel?" she asked cheerfully, ignoring her own discomfort—"is it more comfortable?"

"Ugh, don't mention it—and serve me right for a fool to be at my boyish pranks again, leaping a stile with a loaded gun—though what made it go off puzzles me."

"That was the shot that startled me so," said Barbara, with a little gasp; she would dream of that wound all night, she knew.

"I suppose so. Don't walk so fast, please — is it much farther? Well, there's only one thing to be said, I've settled myself this time, and it's a case of lock-jaw."

"Extremes meet," says the old adage; tragedy often approaches the ludicrous; we laugh the tears into our eyes; sometimes in our heaviest moments a hateful mirth puckers up our face, irresistibly comic ideas intrude themselves. Bab, still trembling and pale from her efforts, and painfully alive to the heavy grip on her shoulder, almost hysterical, indeed, in her great pity and fear, felt oddly amused at the coolness with which the young sportsman stated his case, and the fretful tone in which everything was spoken.

"I don't know," she said, a little doubtfully, and then she felt as though she must laugh, and so she called to Ben instead.

"Of course it will be a case of lock-jaw. A man of my delicate temperament will never escape that. I am not sure that it will not follow."

"Oh, please, don't," began Barbara, all her muscles giving way, and then frightened, as she undoubtedly was, about the result, she began laughing hysterically.

"Oh, please don't," said Barbara again, drying her eyes and almost crying. "I don't mean to be unkind, but I am so frightened, and you make me worse; don't talk like that." And she replaced his hand, feeling very much ashamed of herself.

The young man looked at her, and his eyes twinkled in spite of himself.

"That is one way to treat an unfortunate fellow, Miss—Miss"—and he hesitated.

"Miss Heathcote — Barbara Heathcote," said poor little Bab; "don't say any more about it, Mr. Strath, it is better than crying, anyhow; lean more heavily. I wish I could help you more."

"You know my name," he began—and then stopped. "Is it much farther, Miss Heathcote?"

"No; we are in the middle of the second field. Stand still a minute—ah, how white you look," and Barbara, for all her laugh, could have wrung her hands when she saw his poor suffering face.

"It is this faintness," he muttered.

"Yes, and there's no water to be got," and Barbara looked round her in despair, and then to her horror she saw dark stains oozing through the bandages.

"I have not done it right, and he will bleed to death," she

said to herself. "Ah, what shall I do? Come, come," she said, trying to rally his courage, and her own too, "the house is in sight—there, you can see the chimneys half hidden by trees; try and walk," and she put her arm round him as though he were a child, and drew him on, and then, half leading and half supporting him, she got him into the Brackley Road, and looked round for help.

No one in sight — only a stretch of white dusty road. Barbara uttered a weary sigh, her arms ached and trembled with the strain, but she drew him on, and he obeyed her guidance, moving his limbs more mechanically and heavily every moment.

"Now we've crossed the road and are in the lane," she said, talking hurriedly, as though to stimulate him to fresh exertion, "and here's the house, the one with the green door; perhaps the servants will see us, and come out to help us; one step down, now three low broad ones; this is the hall, there is a sofa somewhere, only it is so dark—keep up, keep up, do, my arms are breaking. Ah, poor fellow, poor fellow, he has fainted," and she could not help crying out as he dropped heavily from her hold, on to the friendly cushions waiting to receive him.

The dragging footsteps, and Barbara's loudly uttered exclamation, brought out Hester.

"Who's that? Is that you, Barbara?"

And then she stood in speechless amazement, for Barbara was on her knees chafing the hand of what looked like a dead man.

"Some water; don't stand looking at me—where is Daddy or Norman; fetch them, Hester, quick, or he will bleed to death."

CHAPTER X.

WHICH IS CHIEFLY INTROSPECTIVE.

"What reed was that on which I leant?
Oh, backward fancy, wherefore wake
The old bitterness again and break
The low beginnings of content."

IN MEMORIAM.

"HUSH, child, you don't know what you are talking about," said a brusque voice, breaking in authoritatively on Barbara's

agitated little sentences. "What we want now, Hester, is a light; I can do nothing in this semi-darkness, and at the same time you may bring water, smelling-salts, or anything else you think useful; fetch them yourself, we don't want the household round us—the quieter the better; and now, Barbara, stand a little farther off, please, and let us see who and what you've got there."

The cool professional voice worked wonders. Hester, always observant and ready in emergencies, rallied from her first surprise, and moved off swiftly in search of the articles she knew he required, while Barbara, gladly relinquishing the cold hand she was trying to chafe, stood breathlessly at the foot of the couch, while Norman gently turned the senseless face round to the light.

"Hold the lamp, Barbara, closely; steadily, please, we don't want any hand-shakes at present. Now let's see—whom have we here; humph, my cousin Westmoreland—nay, my fair cousin," and Norman smiled sardonically into his beard, perhaps to hide deeper feelings. The next moment, however, he was skilfully laying bare the wounded hand, and directing Hester what remedies to apply to bring his patient back to consciousness, but nothing ever escaped Dr. Strath; even in the midst of his intent examination, he had noticed Hester's shudder, as the mutilated hand came to sight, and as soon as his patient showed signs of rallying, he said very quietly but peremptorily: "That will do, Hester, thank you; we have no more need of your services, Barbara will do all I want; put the lamp down on the bracket, Barbara, and give me that roll of bandages off the table, and the little case you see beside it."

No one ever disobeyed Norman, and Hester moved away and shrugged her shoulders slightly. She thought it very strange of him, in fact, she could hardly believe her ears, that she—Hester—always so praised for her ready help and presence of mind, should be asked to withdraw, while Bab—careless, left-handed Bab, remained. No wonder the young mistress curled her lip and shrugged her shoulders, as she crossed the great hall, unwilling to go, but far too proud to stay. Norman Strath knew what he was about for all that; he gave his quick orders, and Barbara executed them to the best of her small ability, her great willingness supplying her want of tact, and it was her watchful glance that detected the first glimmer of consciousness in the patient's eyes; he had opened them once or twice, but had seemed stupefied.

"He is coming to himself now," she whispered, and at the sound of her voice the young man's heavy eyelids unclosed full on the doctor's face. Norman's grave eyes seemed to startle him.

"Where am I?" he said feebly, trying to raise himself, then as he looked down on his bandaged hand, "Oh, I know; she brought me here, but where—where?" and he tried to turn his head to where Barbara stood.

"Come here, Barbara, he wants to see and identify you," said Norman, in his bright professional voice. "You have much for which to thank her, for she did her best, and though her efforts at surgery were rather rude, they were not without effect."

Barbara blushed high, for she detected true appreciation in those few words of praise.

"Yes, I know," returned his cousin wearily, as he sank back after his brief scrutiny. "I am much obliged to her. Well, so we have met again, Norman."

Dr. Strath leaned over him with a frank pleasant smile.

"Yes, Nigel, and very unexpectedly, but I wish it were under happier auspices; you have been very unfortunate."

"I was born under an unlucky star, I believe," replied the other, with a return of the old fretful voice. "A pleasing event with which to inaugurate my return to England, to have a loaded gun go off in one's hand!"

"Do you think it will be attended by lock-jaw?" asked Barbara in a very grave voice.

Never did doctor frown down on a luckless questioner as Dr. Strath frowned on Barbara; it might have annihilated her.

"I can't help it," she returned, with the same concise gravity. "He says he is just the subject for it; and, from what I could make out, fully expected it."

The same half-smile that had before flitted across the young man's face came again to eye and lip, and even Norman relaxed his frown.

"Oh, if it be Nigel's question, I have nothing to say. He was always very apt at self-tormenting, and by his own account is peculiarly alive to all the ills to which human flesh is heir; but come, Miss Barbara, if you agitate my patient with unnecessary talk you will have to answer for it; we must have perfect quiet, if you please."

"But I ought to be going home, Norman," said Nigel faintly; "my mother will be frightened. Some one must send for the carriage."

"I will be the courier of bad tidings, to tell Lady Strath of your little mishap ; but as for St. Ronans to-night, I interdict it. Barbara, you have enacted the part of Good Samaritan to my unlucky cousin by binding up his wounds, now you must find a lodging for him ; for he won't leave this house to-night with my consent."

"Certainly—there is the chintz room," said Barbara with ready alacrity, willing to expiate her foolish speech. "Hester will have it ready in no time ;" and she tripped away.

Nigel seemed about to speak, but Dr. Strath kindly and firmly laid a hand on his lips.

"No more to-night, Nigel ; we will hear all about it to-morrow. There is plenty of time to renew our old intimacy. To-night I am only Dr. Strath, and you are the owner of St. Ronans."

Nigel smiled assent, and closed his eyes wearily. Norman remained quietly beside him, and Barbara, returning, seated herself apart from them in the darkness, where she could see and not be seen.

She wanted to think. Her heart was full—so full—it seemed bursting with its thoughts. She must be alone a little while to try and reduce them to order. What a day it had been ! She had been complaining that her life was barren and monotonous—a mere dragging mill-stream, barren of events and interest—and yet what great sparkles of sunlight had fallen to her share to-day.

She was pining for work, appreciation, and sympathy, never dreaming that she would ever meet with any, and all at once the last person she had thought capable of understanding her—Dr. Strath, the earnest thinker, the pitiless critic—had owned that there was power and imagination in her crude efforts ; had said from his honest conviction that she was an artist, and had looked at her keenly, almost admiringly, as he said so.

And as though this were not sufficient for one day, she had been entangled in a mesh of circumstances that was almost tragedy ; she had been placed for the first time in a horrible emergency, and had not been found altogether wanting. True, she had not performed anything particularly heroic, but she had not done amiss for all that. Norman had given her a word of praise, and had almost hinted that her ready help had saved Nigel ; he had asked her assistance instead of Hester's, which showed that he did not consider her the useless Barbara that Hester called her, and she had done so well that he had not

spoken impatiently once. Barbara felt her heart beat pleasantly at the recollection, and she gave herself a little hug in the darkness. "You are not such a silly little thing as I thought, Bab," she said to herself, with an approving nod. "You are only a poor little misplaced woman, after all," and she smiled as she looked at the circle of lamplight and watched Norman rise from his seat at Hester's signal, and gently support his cousin across the hall. She might have held the light for them, she remembered afterwards, but she preferred hugging herself and rocking to and fro in company with her thoughts. And what made it doubly pleasant was that she had rendered this opportune assistance to Mrs. Strath's nephew; she had done a service, as it were, to the woman she loved best in the world. Barbara liked to think of that; she felt glad she was interested in him.

He had a beautiful face, she thought, only there was something that spoilt it to her eyes; it might have been the proud irritable lines round the mouth, she did not like his mouth at all, she remembered it curved downwards; and then she thought of his impatient voice, and gave a laugh at the recollection.

There was such a mingling of the spoilt child and the young autocrat in it—so irritable and peremptory, too; and it was so odd to address a strange lady in that way—was it because she was so little? Bab wondered; perhaps, with her dress huddled up and her round hat, he had taken her for a child, and Bab shivered and laughed and shivered again, and wondered why she still felt that odd lump in her throat when she was so happy, and whatever made her tremble so; she was afraid she was not a heroine after all.

She burst into a startled laugh presently, when two strong hands lifted her up and brought her to the lamplight, and then she grew ashamed when Norman's keen eyes questioned her, it was so childish to laugh like that.

"Why, Barbara," he said, very gently, "why are you sitting in the dark by yourself, you little Good Samaritan? You are overdone," he continued soothingly, as Barbara, to her great confusion, began to sob at the kindness of his tone; "the accident has harassed you, and your little stock of strength is overtaxed. Don't cry, you have been a good brave child, and done what you could; come into the parlour, Hester has some wine ready for you."

It was all over with her pleasant thoughts and heroineship. Barbara, who hated to be seen in tears, and was ready to tear her own eyes out for shame, was obliged to cry helplessly and

swallow the wine and Hester's petting together, and nestle down among the cushions where Norman had placed her, feeling, if ever there was an utter goose, it was Barbara Heathcote.

Norman presently came to her side, and wished her good-night.

"You must go to bed now and have a good sleep. I have just been up to Nigel, and he is doing very fairly; and now I am off to St. Ronans," and he shook her hand, and smiled at her, and told Hester to go and put the weary child to bed.

Bab had never met with so much attention and thorough petting in her life before; she wondered what Leigh and Daddy would have said to her if they had been at home; and then she plodded upstairs after Hester and let her help her to bed, and fell asleep as she laid her head on the pillow, like the child Norman had called her. Norman meanwhile was striding down the white country road, past dim moonlit fields and glimmering hedges, full of the tangled sweetness of night, fresh cool smells of dewy herbage and faint odours of new-mown hay; all sorts of spicy night breezes curling round him as he strode on swiftly, crunching the heather and ripe quaking grass beneath his heavy foot. A man's walk often betrays his mood: Norman's quick restless strides, his intent face looking neither to the right nor the left, neither to the starry glories above nor the flickering shadows beneath, the feverish baring of his heated brow, and the impatient thud, thud, of his footsteps that seemed running a race with the night, all argued perplexed and uneasy thought. The man was taking stock, as it were, of his own sadness, weighing the past and the present in a mental balance, treading down painful memories and self-regret at every step.

Well, it had come and gone, this meeting that he had so dreaded; and he had met it with professional coolness that told nothing of the smouldering fires beneath; he had spoken easily, carelessly, with an assumption of indifference and kindness, courtesy manifested on a neutral ground, adducing nothing from the past, promising nothing for the future. They had met as men who had parted last as boys—Norman and Nigel, the injurer and the injured, with a great gaping wound between them of wrong suffered and pain endured, thinly covered over by the memory of old pleasures and old love.

They had quarrelled and wrangled, but they had loved each other for all that; not with the love of kindred blood only, but of warm boyish affection. Norman remembered how he had protected his cousin in many an encounter of outward life—

suffering no one to oppress the frail weak boy, and he felt even now a sensation of pleasure in remembering Nigel's devotion to him when he was once ill—the sweetmeats he had abstracted for him, the books he had read, and how the first day he got well they had had one of their greatest quarrels, brought on by his own insufferable temper.

And now they had met again with half a lifetime between them, and he had turned Nigel's senseless face to the light with a feeling, painful yet pleasurable, that his was the hand appointed to bind up his wound ; he did not say this to himself in so many words, for Norman was no man of sentiment, but he felt it all the same, while his eyes met Nigel's with such watchful gravity, and his lips uttered well-meaning professional advice, his very heart yearned over him, compassionate, strong to save. Norman Strath's character was a difficult one to read—these rugged natures, with their thousand intricacies and wonderful interior developments, which offer such tempting fields of exploration to the mental physiognomist, generally remain unvalued and unsolved enigmas to the world at large.

For human reason and human judgments are necessarily of the earth earthly ; "ye are known by your fruits," said diviner lips than ours, and to the end of time men shall judge by the deeds and not the motives, by the outward appearance and not the heart, as a pious writer has once remarked, in some such words as these : "Ah, how many of these rejected and despised ones shall be bidden in another and purer life, where motives shall accuse or excuse our actions, and all things lie open to the judgment that cannot err, to take a higher seat and a nobler crown than ours, 'justified rather than the others.'"

To the world in general, to his friends and patients, Norman Strath presented but one side of his character ; and not even his mother, and least of all Barbara, guessed at the hidden nature of the man.

To them he appeared blameless in his integrity, whole-souled in his profession—a little restless, perhaps, but still profoundly just.

His daily life was marked by rugged kindnesses and covert acts of generosity, by a pride so great, a chivalry so complete, that he would treat the pauper women at the Union with the same respect he would show to a duchess, or if this were not in his humour, a bluntness alike to both. His suspicion and contempt were easily aroused and difficult to allay, his judgments harsh, and his tongue often bitter with concentrated irony ; his

words stung perhaps at the very moment that his hand or purse was stretched out to relieve ; and as often resulted from such strange admixture, the humble folks fully understood and appreciated him, his acquaintances feared, and his friends bore with his eccentricities, swallowed his satire, and loved him in spite of all.

Barbara, even though she entertained a hostile position towards him, and prided herself on her reserve and the counter-irritation which his unmeasured contempt for her exuberant fancies never failed to call forth, yet sometimes voluntarily let down her colours and went over to the enemy, touched to the heart by some act of generosity which he had endeavoured, but failed to hide.

Her reasoning on such occasions was one-sided and thoroughly Barbaric : he behaved shamefully to her, no doubt, by treating her like a child, and assuming a right to lecture and depress her ; she never enjoyed any of her little schemes or plans after Norman had ventilated them ; but she could afford to be magnanimous and avow that she saw virtues in her enemy ; after all that could be said, his bark was worse than his bite, and his mother, whose opinion of course was worth something, saw plenty of goodness in him.

To-night, especially, Barbara's heart had been soft to him ; he had acknowledged her genius, and she had stood by and appreciated his ready skill, and served under his orders right humbly, and lastly, when she had behaved childishly, and expected nothing but manifest scorn, he had acted gently towards her, making allowances and comforting her by the very kindness of his tones. No, Norman should never be her enemy again, she vowed that to herself, as she laid her weary head on the pillow, and strong in this virtuous resolution for peace and friendship, she wholly ignored the possibility of future sneers, satire, and all the strictures and advice that so galled and fretted her high spirit. But little did Barbara think, as she dealt out to Norman this tardy justice of appreciation, that the man whom she more often blamed than praised, was infinitely noble, beyond her possibility of conception, and, with all his faultiness, purely and innately good.

Why should she guess, when his mother did not, the hidden strength of a nature that was capable of deathless love, and powerful to endure the cruellest self-sacrifice, or rather that could and would suffer for the right or for the weak : that was content to move endlessly, aimlessly, in the narrow confined

orbit that chafed him with a life-long fret, but which he endured with the same passive patience with which the religious or ascetic wears his hair shirt, and carries the chain that eats into his flesh?

He was that type of man, that when the centuries struggled and fought for the truth, would have swelled the ranks that followed the Nazarene; had he lived then, he would have entered the noble army of martyrs, would have sealed his faith with his blood in the arena or at the stake; and yet he was one who loved his life dearly, who held it as a precious pearl, to put out to the noblest merchandise.

Norman never complained that his life was different to what he hoped, that the narrow compass of a country village could not measure his ambition, nor afford scope for the strength he felt in him; never repined fruitlessly that he, who was formed for nobler things, who could have achieved a success in the New World, should be set to physic village boors and old women at the Union, or a few fine country ladies who had left their favourite physician in town; he never spoke of these things, he was content to let them prey upon him in secret, like the Spartan boy who let the fox gnaw his vitals: in his long lonely rides at noon, night, or early morning, he would wrestle with the thoughts and passions that oppressed him, combating them fiercely in his muscular Christianity, in words sometimes spoken aloud, sometimes uttered in the recesses of his heart—words which he had gleaned from Holy Writ, and bound about him with the threefold cord of love. “He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.” Ah, there lay the secret of Norman’s self-sacrifice, his renunciation of a hundred ambitious hopes that would have led him to toil and starve in the New World, and fight his way through obstacles of time and place, climbing painfully his way up the ladder of life—he had but placed his foot on the lowest rung—and behold the silken cord hung round his neck, and dragged him down, and bound him, a moral Pegasus, to the plough: his widowed mother, with her broken life, her scanty means opposed to past affluence, there was his hindrance; he must stay with her, maintain her in comfort, and perhaps, who knows? restore her to something of her old position; he would not leave her to obscurity and loneliness, though she would have borne both willingly for his sake, while he worked for her elsewhere; for Norman could do nothing by halves, his renunciation must be complete, and so he buried his hopes, past and future, in the present of a country doctor’s life, and so took up the burden of his days.

There was a little light dawning for him just now, a little fire whereat to warm his frozen energies, to thaw his pent-up passions ; did he know it ?

This meeting with his cousin had tried him sorely ; it had raked up an old grievance, a past pain. Norman was no morbid self-tormentor, loaded with scruples, dolorous with remorse ; but he felt keenly that he had injured Nigel, and no one, his mother especially, guessed the measure of his regret.

It was unbounded, it was self-accusing, it was true to the moral justice of his nature ; he had tried himself at the bar of his own conscience, on the principle of every man his own absolver, himself the criminal and judge, and had found himself guilty.

True he knew, no one better, that his hand had not dealt the blow that had ended in that terrible fall, that had for so many years wrecked the health and happiness of one young life ; he knew that it was the result of accident, and Nigel's persistence ; but he could not forget the fierce wrestling that preceded it, the ungovernable temper that led him to attack one so much frailer and feebler than himself ; he knew that his superior strength had forced Nigel to the head of the staircase, and had Nigel died from the effects of that fall, he would have branded himself as his murderer. As it was, he owned to himself that the blame was his and no other's, and it was this consciousness of his own sin that had led him to acquiesce in Lady Strath's harsh sentence that he should not see Nigel again ; and though this prohibition was removed just before their departure from England, and Norman was admitted to see his cousin, the altered looks of the injured boy, and his helplessness, smote on Norman's heart so hardly that he grew dumb in his anguish—stubborn, as Lady Strath said afterwards—and could say nothing of all his sorrow ; but Nigel, generous with all his faults, read the sullen downcast looks more truly, and accepted that mute penitence, and comforted him with frank expressions of forgiveness.

"Don't look so, Norman, I would rather see you cry than look like that ; we were both to blame, but I the most, and my mother shall not tell every one that you pushed me down."

"I did not, I did not, Nigel," were the only words poor Norman said during the short interview that was allowed the lads. "I wish it had been I that was hurt ; yes, that I do," and Nigel detected the sob in his voice.

Norman never forgot those few minutes, nor, to tell the truth, Nigel either ; they felt then that they had loved each other, and regretted their want of mutual forbearance ; with Norman it was a deep and abiding thing, and he registered in his young mind a boyish vow, that he had kept intact till now, that should it ever be in his power to make restitution to Nigel for his long pain, even though at the expense of his dearest happiness, he would make it at all hazards. God and, later on, one other knew how he kept that vow.

CHAPTER XI.

NORMAN FINDS A WELCOME AT ST. RONANS.

"Thine eyes' blue tenderness, thy long fair hair,
And the wan lustre of thy features caught,
From contemplation, where serenely wrought
Seems sorrow's softness claimed from its despair,
Have thrown such speaking sadness in thine air,
With mines of unalloy'd and stainless thought,
I should have deem'd thee doom'd to earthly care."

BYRON.

NORMAN went striding on through the moonlight and chewing the cud of many a sweet and bitter memory, as he walked, nor did he once break off the painful thread of his thoughts till he reached the lodge gates of St. Ronans.

"You are a late visitor, doctor," said the old grey-headed lodge-keeper, one of Norman's favourite patients.

Dr. Strath merely nodded and passed on, following the windings of a carriage drive, half avenue, half shrubbery, and on one side so densely planted as to resemble the outskirts of a wood, and through the dusky shadow of which he could catch the fair shining of a large sheet of water, known in the village as the St. Ronans Lake. A belt of gleaming laurels and oleanders led him by a sudden turning to the long terrace before the house ; but he paused a moment before he ascended the broad flight of steps leading to the portico, to look out on what seemed a scene of enchantment.

For all around him lay great still gardens, steeped in moonlight, and breathing of nothing but silence and dew, with shining walks everywhere, and glimmering statues stretching

their white arms out from the dim misty lawn: not a sound, not a movement, anywhere. Norman drew a long breath as he looked. "How dream-like and unreal everything looks!" he muttered. "I could almost imagine I was Eichendorf's Taugenichts, of which Barbara is so fond, when he wandered about into all sorts of moonlight places, and found himself entertained as the real Brautigam: it reminds me of some verses of his, which Ludwig used to spout at Heidelberg;" and he hummed—

"Es war als hätt' der Himmel
Die erde still geküsst,
Dass sie im Blüthen Schimmer
Von ihm nun, träumen müsst."

"I was fond of poetry then, I remember. Humph! that's half a lifetime ago. I must wake up the enchanted palace, which looks asleep, for all its lighted windows. What an illumination!—it might be a *fête*," and he walked up the steps slowly, eyeing the front of the house with the air of a connoisseur, admiring its noble façade, but shrugging his shoulders slightly at the same time. He was saying to himself: "Oakleigh Cottage and St. Ronans—a marvellous affinity, surely; and the full lap and the niggard heart go together; and the earth revolves round the sun, and the moon round the earth, and, as the old wise king has it, 'There is nothing new'—'Vanitas vanitatum!'" and so Norman passed over the threshold of St. Ronans.

After that he was profoundly calm, and the gaily-dressed lacquey who answered his summons, and ushered him into the great glittering hall, looked quite astonished at the nocturnal visitor who desired him so haughtily to show him into a room, and tell his mistress that Dr. Strath must see her at once on pressing business. But, as Jeames informed his fellow-servants afterwards, "he was that grand and that ugly, that he could refuse him nothing;" and with the instinct of his order, which always detects the real gentleman in spite of the shabbiest exterior—Dr. Strath wore his surgery coat, having forgotten or not cared to change it—he at once ushered him into the drawing-room, and, with a muttered "he would tell her ladyship's maid," withdrew, leaving him alone in the shining and splendid wilderness.

Now it so happened that Norman had an enterprising mind, and not satisfied, apparently, with the green lounges and gilt-backed chairs where he could have sat and studied attitudes in

a dozen gleaming mirrors, he became curiously intent on inspecting some heavy velvet hangings drawn before some folding-doors; and with the certainly unorthodox notion that he was monarch of all he surveyed, for the present at least, he proceeded to reconnoitre hidden territories, and with the utmost coolness drew aside the curtain and peeped in.

And he saw a tiny room hidden within the other, full of green tints and shady lights, and with pink hangings which seemed to give a faint blush of colour to the whole, and nestled up in a great armchair a little figure in white, whom Norman took at first for a child, but when he had seen the face—a very startled one now—he knew it for the face of an old friend.

“Why, Nest!” he said, advancing quickly with outstretched hands; “little Nest!” and all his kind heart shone in his eyes, “have you forgotten me? I am your old playfellow and friend, Norman.”

Nest looked up at him shyly, and then fluttered towards him, and put two timid little hands in his, and beamed up at him, blushing a little, and regarding him with odd wistful looks, yet somewhat dubiously.

“Are you Norman?” she faltered; “dear old Norman, who was so good to me? I do not know your face at all, you are so altered;” and she drew her hands from his,—they looked like a pair of crushed lilies in his grasp, and something glittered in her eyes and made them misty. “Ah, *bon cousin!* if you are he, you are strange to me; but I remember the past;” and then she gave him a sad little smile and took his hand again, and pressed it, and made him sit and talk to her, while all her looks and words and movements came to Norman like the chords of long-forgotten music.

“You are not changed, Nest,” he said, with grave tenderness; “it is the same face, the same loving heart as ever, I am sure.” And he looked her all over with the interest of one inspecting a long-lost treasure, recognising its beauties and defects, and lingering over them lovingly one by one.

She was scarcely more than a child in stature now—Barbara would have looked tall beside her; but there was something infinitely more womanly in her than in Barbara; she had the look of one who had felt her way to womanhood through long suffering, and having found it, remained patient.

To Norman’s startled eyes she had seemed at first nothing but a dazzle of white. Her dress was of shining silk, and she wore no colour at all, and no ornament, save a string of pearls

round her neck, with a tiny diamond cross attached to it ; and her neck and arms gleamed out of her dress, thin, almost attenuated, but still so purely white that one could not find fault with them.

The face was without beauty, but, oh ! so sweet and good, with its pale halo of hair that fell round it like a shadow, and which she wore loose as a child, perhaps to conceal her slight deformity.

There was little, after all, to attract notice—a painful bend or stoop, a crookedness, one shoulder higher than the other. Norman noted it all with professional eyes during the short minute that he had sat silently beside her ; but she felt his scrutiny, gentle as it was, and shrank from it, colouring with womanly embarrassment ; a look of suffering crossed her face, and then she smiled at him as an angel might.

It was long years ago since Nest had first taken up her life-long cross, and lifted it on her drooping shoulders, and carried it meekly. It was heavy, she said to herself—very heavy ; it crushed her spirit sadly, and kept it low ; but crosses are not made of flowers, and “no cross, no crown,” said Nest.

And so she looked out on the world with odd womanish eyes that had something of the saint in them, and felt wistful yearnings, divine hungers of the soul, and folded her patient hands, and said that it needs must be, for some hunger and some are satisfied, and the aggregate of human suffering is not yet filled to the brim ; and wondered if all the gems in her crown were numbered—for every sorrow a gem—and what she had suffered no one knew, save God and her guardian angel.

She had been a neglected child, and Heaven knows the world of misery involved in those three words ; and though time and circumstances and her own sweetness had softened her mother's heart, Nest knew it could never beat in such warm love for her as it did for Nigel, and she yearned for it as she did for personal beauty, or for all the world holds dear.

Nest prayed for beauty as passionately as ever Barbara did, and deformity was given her—slight perhaps to loving eyes, but exaggerated painfully in her own. She felt herself stamped with a peculiar loneliness, different from other girls, apart from the young, the active, and the happy, to whom she yet felt drawn with that human longing for a friend which is the truest instinct of our nature, but which her timidity forbade her to seek.

But perhaps the greatest suffering Nest had known was the

last two winters which they had spent at Naples and Vienna ; for Lady Strath had declared in her careless selfishness that Nest had given way to her sickly and morbid fancies long enough, and must see a little of the world. Nest rarely complained, and never resisted her mother's will. She went, but what an ordeal it was she endured ! Evening after evening, night after night, she sat in her little corner under her mother's wing, dressed like a princess, but white and trembling, and looked out upon the world—its pomp, its glitter, and its vanity—with eyes full of a woman's sadness. She saw beauty there such as she had dreamed about, surrounded by adoration and worship. She would have sacrificed all her jewels to have changed places for one evening with the plainest girl there ; and to have laughed as she laughed. Nobody noticed her ; they passed her by with a pitying smile ; what did she want there, a poor deformed girl, with her sad pale face and shadowy hair ? and Nest would shrink back in her corner, looking sadder and paler as the night wore on, and on her return home pull off her jewels, not angrily, but wearily, and kneel down at the foot of her little bed, with the tears streaming from her eyes, and stretch out her eyes in the darkness to where she could see a dim picture of a thorn-crowned head, and pray her dear Lord to comfort her, and have pity on her lonely heart—her very, very lonely heart, sobbed Nest.

Ah, how many such prayers go up to the Master of years ! Yea, what passionate tears, what yearnings, from those who go branded through life with some piteous deformity, some infirmity of the flesh which is their especial cross !

Is there any balm in Gilead for those who have to suffer a lifelong pity or a lifelong scorn—for those who are often halt and maimed in spirit as well as in flesh—fretted, and warped, and chafed by their own despair ? Yea, there is comfort for these, if they bear it as a cross, and not a scourge—as a trial, and not a punishment—as a loving dispensation, and not a curse.

Oh, gird on your cross, then, weary sisters, even though you bear it after Him to the very Mount of Sorrows ; though you fall under it many times, you shall rise again. “ No cross, no crown.” What if Nest's childish faith be true, and for every sorrow here you wear a gem hereafter ? Norman guessed instinctively a little of all this when he saw the look of pain flit over Nest's face ; his great man's heart felt full of pity for her—the same sort of pity that he once felt for a poor wounded

bird which lay struggling at his feet with its broken wing ; he thought, if Nest were only his sister, how he would have loved and cherished her.

"Nest," he said gently, "I am a stranger to you : you do not recognise me ; you shrink away from my look."

"Nay," she said, and her face grew so calm and sweet, "I am only the silly little Nest I always was, shy, and foolish, and afraid. I shall know you soon, Norman, never fear. Your eyes have got their old trick of smiling even when you look grave, as you do now ; but you have something to tell me ?"

"You guess rightly ; I have," returned Norman quietly. "Have you not wondered what has become of Nigel all this time, or is it his general custom to keep out so late ?"

"Mamma was just getting uneasy about him, and, to tell you the truth, so was I. Nigel has an odd trick sometimes of being absent at meal-times, and wandering about the country with his gun or sketch-book, sometimes for a whole day together without giving us warning ; but mamma told him such habits would never suit English life or English climate ; and, indeed, I am afraid it will be highly injurious to him, he is so delicate. You are a doctor, Norman ; you will agree with us, of course ?"

"Most entirely ; but Nigel is not wandering about the country ; he is safely housed at Dr. Heathcote's. He met with an accident—don't look so frightened, it is nothing so very alarming : he is better now."

"But what accident ? You need not fear my calmness. Norman ; speak out. Mamma is not here."

"Well, yes, I will speak out ; but, Nest, you must be brave and quiet, for your mother's sake. Nigel was foolish enough to leap over a stile with a loaded gun ; it went off, and lodged its contents in his hand, and of course, poor fellow, it is very much injured."

Nest kept quite quiet, but her eyes looked terribly anxious ; Norman took her hand to reassure her, and went on : "One of Dr. Heathcote's daughters found him in this condition, and got him home somehow or other to her father's house ; and as I was fortunately on the spot, no great mischief ensued, and with care and perfect quiet he will do well—at least, I hope so."

Nest gave a piteous little moan, and wrung her hands.

"Indeed, indeed, he will," pleaded Norman, "you must believe me ;" but Nest shook her head.

"You don't know him—the delicacy of his constitution; he looks well and seems well, but that is nothing. The foreign doctors mamma consulted say that there is no real stamina—no strength: his heart is so weak, that any great shock, any protracted anxiety, even of pleasure, would be too much for him. Oh, Norman," and here she sobbed, "you don't know how fearful we are of him; how we guard him from everything but his own wilfulness."

"My dear child, I do understand," said Norman kindly. "I know Nigel's constitution well, I can read it at a glance, and I reiterate my former opinion that the injury is merely local, and that with quiet and care he will do well. You can trust me, I hope?"

"Oh yes!" she returned, a little comforted, and looking up into the kind face that somehow always inspired confidence. "But, Norman, what shall we do? Mamma ought to be told at once; but I dread her knowing it so. She will think the worst. And, oh! she is so devoted to Nigel."

"I will tell her myself. I came for the purpose; but, Nest, where is she? This house might be an enchanted palace, it is so brilliant and silent."

"We are always quiet when Nigel is not here," sighed Nest. "Mamma is in her dressing-room with a bad headache. The servant had just told me that a gentleman was wishing to speak to her on business, when you drew back the curtain; and I told him no one could be admitted to her to-night."

"But you must contrive for me to see her," urged Norman. "Go up now, dear Nest, and tell her that I must speak to her on business; but do not bring in Nigel's name, if you can help it. It will only flurry her, and yourself too."

Nest, perfectly trained in docility, rose at once; and Norman amused himself in her absence by walking restlessly up and down the long drawing-room, chafing at the delay, till she reappeared and stood waiting silently for him at the door.

"Well?" he said impatiently, looking down at her flushed and discomfited face, "am I to go up?"

"Yes, if you please," said Nest, in a very low tone, as she turned and led the way.

Norman understood it all. The news of his visit had been received ungraciously. Nest had had to bear the brunt of her mother's annoyance, while he himself would be received with well-bred smiles. "Of all things, I hate a woman's duplicity," muttered Norman, between his teeth. A hard word for a little

feminine deceit or false smiles ; but Norman, with his stern integrity, was a very harsh-judging man. He called the shams of society lies, and stripped them of their varnished gloss when he could, laying bare the bald and barren truth in all its homely guise, calling things by their right names, never scrupling at an ugly word. So society often rose against him, and voted Dr. Strath ungentlemanly and a bore, terms at which the cynic snapped his fingers and laughed the louder. The handsome staircase at St. Ronans, which was broad enough for six able-bodied men to walk abreast, was first broken by a noble landing-place, and then launched into two lesser flights, leading on either side to a gallery which ran round three sides of the hall, and on which opened all the sleeping-rooms of the family. Nest led the way round one side of the gallery, and tapping lightly at a red-baized door on the right, pushed it open and beckoned to Norman to enter, where he found himself in the most luxurious dressing-room he had ever seen.

I think Barbara would have judged Norman a most pitiless critic if she recalled his cold strictures on Lady Strath, and compared them with the handsome gentlewoman who rose from her seat as he entered, and met him with such gracious smiles ; but then Dr. Strath never admired those whose conduct he condemned,—that was the uncharitableness of the man. When compelled to admit reluctantly Lady Strath's good looks, he spoke of her face as merely a fine mask without any play of feeling ; and Barbara afterwards admitted he was right.

But she was very striking to strangers in her well-preserved beauty, which was certainly wonderful for her age. Her cheek was as smooth and round as ever, her broad white forehead free from wrinkles, and her brown hair apparently unmixed with grey ; and, but for the portliness of her figure, which slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, no one could have believed she was in her fiftieth year.

Such was the woman who advanced with so much grace to Norman, bidding him welcome with outstretched hand and cordial smiles.

Norman responded gravely but politely, and then, refusing the seat to which she waved him, reared up his massive height against the mantelpiece, and so looked down at her from a vantage. This was a habit of Dr. Strath's when he wished to influence or awe people, whom nevertheless he kept at arm's length.

She felt the strength of his position as she looked up at him, and her tone became a little less gracious.

"Well, the boy has become the man; and what a great strong man you have grown, Norman! how proud your mother must be of you!" Norman grunted. "'Handsome is as handsome does,' as I often tell Nest. You have not inherited your mother's good looks; but what of that?"

"Or my father's either," replied Norman bluntly.

"Ah, he was a splendid man, I have heard: our children do not always take after us;" and she sighed. "Well, better late than never, Norman; and so you have treated us to a nocturnal visit. Very kind of you, I am sure."

"You have nothing for which to thank me," he returned in his brusque tone. "I have only come on most unpleasant business;" and then, without any more roundabout speeches, he detailed Nigel's accident, dwelling on it certainly as lightly as he could, and giving her fully to understand that he was comfortable and going on well. But he had not the quiet auditor he had in Nest. At the first mention of Nigel's name Lady Strath's passive face flushed with maternal interest; but as he proceeded she interrupted him with little cries of terror and love, and then turned deadly pale, and rocked herself to and fro, looking as if she were going to swoon.

Nest bent over her like a little shining angel, and hushed and soothed her; but she pushed her away, almost beside herself.

"Oh, my boy! my Nigel!" she moaned; "it will kill him. Don't speak to me, Norman: you don't know what I fear. Ring the bell, Nest. I will not wait to have the carriage out; it can follow me. Tell Stevens to bring me my cloak and hood at once."

Nest was about to obey her mother's behest, but Dr. Strath stopped her.

"Wait a moment, Nest; your mother could not have understood me. No one must see Nigel to-night."

"No one—of course not; but his mother will. You little know to whom you are speaking, Norman, when you forbid me to see my boy;" and she turned from him with a movement full of haughtiness.

"My dear madam," replied Dr. Strath in the same half-stern, half-soothing tone he had used to her all the time, "I will not answer for it if you disturb my patient to-night. I have just administered a soothing draught; and if you leave him to my care he will do well; but his nerves are sadly shaken by the shock, and the least excitement, the least anxiety on your part, might induce fever or some other ill."

"You don't know what you are talking about," she repeated angrily, fuming at the quiet decision of his tone. "You cannot know what you are about when you separate us. My boy will never sleep without his mother's kiss to-night: I must watch beside him, or he will not rest."

"Pardon me," returned Norman coolly, "he was asleep before I left him. I told him I should refuse you access till the morning, and he was quite content. He sent his love, and begged that you would remain quietly, and come to him in the morning."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Lady Strath angrily. "Who attended to his wound?—you?" Norman bowed. "You are a young doctor," she continued. "Would it not be better if Dr. Heathcote, or any other more experienced man, were to see him, and judge of the treatment?"

Norman bit his lip, and his blood boiled within him. She had impugned his professional skill; his whose knowledge was worth a dozen Dr. Heathcotes.

"Any common surgeon could have done what I have for Nigel. You need not be alarmed: to-morrow he will be Dr. Heathcote's patient;" and he bowed stiffly with a superb pride, either not noticing, or pretending not to see, the extended hand. She called him back before he had reached the door, breaking into passionate tears as she did so.

"I did not mean anything unkind," she sobbed out. "Don't visit it upon my boy; if you do him good, I shall be grateful to you for ever: he was always fond of you, Norman, though you injured him."

Norman listened with blackness on his brow. "Dr. Heathcote will meet all your demands, and I have perfect faith in his good sense. If you wish for a London doctor to consult with him, you have but to give your orders."

"Yes, I know; but watch over him a little yourself. You are very clever, I hear, although young in practice; but sometimes the young doctors are cleverer than the old ones. Don't mind my ill-humour, Norman; I am such an unhappy mother. Give my dear love to my boy, and take care of him, and God bless you for it;" and she rocked herself to and fro, moaning aloud.

"You need not be so distressed; I have perfect confidence in Dr. Heathcote," was all Norman said; and then he went out, and Nest glided after him, and stood by him silently at the hall door.

The sad little face touched him unexpressibly, and he stooped over her, looking down on her with his grave smile. The kind action unloosed her tongue.

"Oh, Norman, you must not mind anything mamma said ; she is so unhappy about poor Nigel. Mothers are so jealous, and say all sorts of things ; and Nigel is her idol."

The shining dress, the loose hair, the mild sweet face ! Norman's heart yearned over her with brotherly fondness, and he felt all his anger and pride melt away as he looked at her.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," he said softly. "Good-night, little Nest ;" and he turned from her, hat in hand, and went out into the moon-lighted garden, and the dark shrubberies, and long white country roads, and a woman's figure seemed to walk beside him unseen, and lead him like a little child.

CHAPTER XII.

BARBARA MAKES A NEW FRIEND.

"And yet, believe me, good as well as ill,
Woman's at best a contradiction still."

SHAKESPEARE.

On the morning after the accident, Hester and Barbara were sitting together in the Harlequin room, talking over their work in a cosy confidential manner, while Connie, idle as usual, sat at their feet, with Ben's head upon her lap, and her large round eyes fixed on Barbara's face, interested, wrapped up, in the delights of a narrative drawn to the life.

Barbara looked a little pale, a little subdued, perhaps ; but the glories of heroineship were strong upon her this morning, and she was tasting the full flavour of a thorough feminine enjoyment, that exquisite pleasure of relating an adventure in which we—delightful nominative governing the whole sentence, verbs, adjectives, and all—have borne ourselves so bravely, that our little brazen trumpets blow themselves hoarse with their notes of triumph.

What a delight to the true woman, this revelling in the I's and We's of innocent egotism, lapping up comparatives and superlatives by the dozen ! what histrionic effects, what involuntary exaggerations, what thickly laid colouring, what lurid

backgrounds, tinted fires of our own lighting ! while on this fancied stage we strut out our little parts, poor spluttering geniuses, heroes and heroines in our own eyes,—“ thus and thus have I done.”

Barbara was enjoying these sweets of retrospection to the full ; her sentences rolled over each other, eked out by Connie's little gasps and cries of wonderment ; while Hester listened with perfect condescension and appreciation, annotating her remarks feelingly, and adding proper ejaculations at the right intervals, her words all the while so gentle, and her aspect so benign, that Barbara, quite intoxicated with the incense of public opinion, exerted herself to the utmost, and felt as happy as a queen.

“ It is like a scene out of a story-book, Barbara. Well, and what did you do next ? ” cried wondering Connie. “ Never mind telling us quite so much about your own feelings ; that is a verb understood, you know,” she continued, with a little laugh at her own cleverness. “ I always skip the moral reflections in a novel.”

“ Yet perhaps they contain the pith of the whole,” remarked Barbara meditatively. “ What is the use of writing them, if they are not to be read ? No one lets a person tell a story in her own way.”

“ That is because people take such a roundabout way of telling it,” replied Connie, in an argumentative voice ; the course of true narrative, like that of true love, being seldom destined to run smooth. They were drawing to the close now, and she was becoming aggravated at Barbara's slow meanderings. “ All the books in the world might be condensed into half, if they would just tell the story and have done with it, and leave the moral till the end, like Æsop in his fables, and not introduce a sermon into every other chapter.”

“ I think it is you who are interrupting Barbara now,” remarked Hester gently, as she smoothed down the curls of rebellious Connie ; but she was spared any further speech, for at this moment the door opened, and Lady Strath was announced.

“ Lady Strath ! ” exclaimed Barbara and Connie, *sotto voce*, and they exchanged looks of anxiety and mutual sympathy, conscious, in a moment, of print frocks and rumpled hair ; but Hester, who wore a cambric with the same dignity as she would velvet, whose glossy hair was always in order and unruffled smoothness, much to Barbara's inward and envious chagrin, merely laid down her work and advanced, with the utmost composure, to meet the stately presence rustling slowly towards her.

This certainly showed a greatness of mind on Hester's part ; for never had Sunningford seen such French silks, such laces, such ribbons, or smelled such sweet languid odours as seemed to emanate from every rustling fold. Lady Strath dressed like a Parisienne, and to dress perfectly and walk gracefully were two of her objects in life ; and though it may seem small and trivial to some who have not studied girl-nature successfully, it did show excellent good-breeding on Hester's part, and an absolute want of vanity, that she could smile and talk so easily with this radiant stranger without a single thought as to her own appearance, or the consciousness that her cambric had paled and faded with frequent washing, and that her collar was not so snow-white as usual.

Barbara, on the other hand, felt ashamed and full of compunction, longing vainly for daintier and cleaner apparel, and then grew defiant and critical, and by dint of measuring silks and laces scornfully, and weighing mind against matter, found Barbara Heathcote, print dress and all, a thing not to be despised, and so grew haughty and at her ease in a breath ; but to arrive at ease through the arguments of reason and, perhaps, a little scorn, was as far below Hester's unconscious grace as a parvenu is below a real nobleman. One of Barbara's greatest defects was, that she carried her internal consciousness and envious self-tormenting into these trifles of social life, and grew so outwardly proud and dominant that no one would have guessed how inwardly humble she was at heart.

"My dear Miss Heathcote," said Lady Strath, as she extended a gracious hand and looked admiringly at the fair face which attracted all strangers alike, "I have no words in which to thank you for your generous kindness to my poor boy ; but, if the gratitude of a mother can repay you, be assured I am indebted to you for life."

"My dear Lady Strath," replied Hester cheerfully, "you have mistaken me for my sister ; it is Barbara you have to thank, not me. Let me introduce her to you. Barbara, Lady Strath wishes to speak to you."

Lady Strath was hardly to be blamed for the too visible surprise and disappointment written on her countenance as Barbara came forward in that shy defiant way of hers. Barbara was no beauty, and rarely pleased at first sight. A little brown girl, sweet and winning enough to those who loved her, but to a stranger rather insignificant-looking. She was a little pale too, and her eyes were dimmed with last night's crying ; and

she had run her fingers through her hair, and set it in a fever of ripples, so that she looked scared and a little wild. No wonder, then, that Lady Strath judged after the outward appearance, and felt wholly disinclined to thank the little rough-looking girl; but her heart was soft and grateful to these Heathcotes who had befriended her son, and so she made an effort to overcome her stiffness, and began afresh.

"I have made a mistake, your sister tells me; and you are the good Samaritan, Miss Barbara. You are very young-looking to have rendered such efficient help. Norman tells me you acted with the greatest presence of mind. You must look upon me as your friend in future. We are very grateful to her, are we not, Nest?"

A little blue cloud that had hovered in her mother's outskirts flashed into sight at this, and the owner of a broad-brimmed hat responded timidly: "We are very grateful, mother."

Barbara's quick eyes scanned the broad-brimmed hat, blue cloud, and tiny bent figure in a moment, and then she turned to Lady Strath:

"I don't think you have much cause to thank me," she blurted out with that delicious mixture of frankness and shyness with which Barbara a'ways addressed strangers. "I did little enough, and that little very badly." With which perfectly candid remark Bab folded her hands demurely and remained silent.

"Norman told us quite a different story, did he not, Nest?" said Lady Strath, with another little gush. "You undervalue yourself, Miss Barbara. You have done us infinitely good service."

"And we are deeply grateful," added Nest softly.

Barbara looked at them both, and unfolded her hands. "Norman often laughs at me: perhaps he was laughing then. It is not like him to praise any one needlessly." And then she refolded her hands more virtuously than ever. She had been rejoicing in Norman's praise half the night; she had been treating Hester and Connie to a highly-coloured sketch of her own wonderful presence of mind; but it would not have been Barbara if she had missed an opportunity for contradiction, and something in Lady Strath's softly-spoken words rang false to her sensitive ears. "She is disappointed—it is not Hester; and I won't take her praise." That was the keynote of the whole.

Lady Strath found her a little provoking.

"Well, well! I see your modesty refuses to accept my thanks; we must try some other way. Nest, I will leave you to make acquaintance with these young ladies," and now she smiled graciously at Connie, "while I trouble Miss Heathcote to show me the way to Nigel's room;" and she turned with an air of unmistakable relief to stately Hester, standing so quietly beside her.

"My father has only just left your son. Norman placed him under his care. He is out now, I believe; but I will send him up to you directly he returns. Connie, run to the surgery, and see if father has come in."

Connie vanished through the window, and the door closed slowly on the others. Barbara drew a long breath, and took up her work. Nest, after a moment's hesitation, drew her seat closer to her, and, untying her broad-brimmed hat, hung it loosely on her arm. The day was warm, and she looked pale and heated. The action pleased Barbara; it was unconventional and unexpected. She poised her needle for a moment in mid-air, and eyed her more benignantly, and then, refreshed apparently by her brief examination, fairly smiled.

The machinery of human nature is complex and difficult; one finds out secret springs at times which influence actions, and yet surprise you with their insignificance. Who, for example, would trace Barbara's smile, so full of amity and welcome, to its right cause? In that brief moment's scrutiny she had noted the defects of Nest's figure, and the sickly plainness of a face whose only beauty was its purity and sweetness. Here was no rivalry to excite her envy, no loveliness to fill her with chagrin and regret; instead, pleasant feelings of pity began to influence her; a warm personal yearning for that sweet sad face filled her heart, and kindled into a smile. And Barbara's smile was like sunshine: Nest took comfort from it, and drew still nearer to her. Barbara laid down her work and smiled again. This time it acted like magic.

"What a dear house! and what a lovely garden!" began Nest, with a little eagerness, and she pointed with her thin hand to the long green aisle and smooth shadowy lawn. "What trees! what shadows! what coolness! It is better than the lawn at St. Ronans."

Barbara nodded her head, well satisfied.

"I don't believe there is another garden like it in all Sunningford; not even Hunsden Park or Briarsley. Sir William Travers's place cannot compete with it in the least,

and I love it. But there's one thing that Ben and I like even better, and that's the pine-woods."

"Do you mean the plantations round St. Ronans?"

"Yes. Ben and I have been accustomed to roam about them at our own sweet will, unmolested by master or keeper. And when we heard new owners were coming to St. Ronans, we made up a very wry face between us—I can't tell you if Ben's face or mine were the longer—at the thought that our liberty and right of wandering might be curtailed."

"There is no fear of that," interrupted Nest.

"No, not a bit. I am quite sure of it now. Since our little adventure down by the bracken path, our monopoly of the pine-woods will not be molested."

Nest shuddered, and then looked wistfully at Barbara.

"My gratitude must be a silent one, I suppose?" and she gave a little sigh.

"You are wrong there," returned Barbara abruptly. "You may thank me as much as you like, and I will listen to you with pleasure."

"But you would not accept mamma's thanks!" said Nest, with a little wonderment. "You contradicted her so, you would not let her speak."

"Ah, that was a different thing," observed Barbara loftily. "I saw that she was not really grateful to me in her heart. She was sorry it was I, and not Hester, all the time. Do you think I could not see that? Not that I wanted any thanks," continued Barbara, with a little jerk and toss of her head, "or any acknowledgment for doing so simple a thing; but I wonder if the poor Jew in the parable was less grateful to the good Samaritan because he was not so handsome as the Levite who passed him by."

Nest stared at this singular application of Biblical knowledge, and remained silent. Bab shook her brown mane more energetically than ever.

"It is the way of the world, I suppose. I ought not to be surprised at it," continued the young philosopher. "But let us talk of something pleasanter. How do you like Sunningford?"

Nest, who had looked a little uncomfortable during the foregoing speech, brightened up manifestly at the question.

"Oh, very much—very much indeed." Thereat Barbara eyed her curiously. "Do not you, Miss Heathcote?"

"Who, I?—I am Barbara. Yes, I like it of course, be-

cause it is my home ; but I get dreadfully tired of it sometimes."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. Why are you looking at me? I do believe I shall like you," she continued impulsively. "Let us be friends."

It was only one of Barbara's abrupt speeches ; but Nest coloured all over with shy pleasure.

"I knew I should like you the first instant," she returned, with honest simplicity ; "but then I never expect any one to take notice of me, you know. I am afraid you are very clever."

"No, not very," returned Bab modestly ; "but then there's no knowing what I may become. I have a fancy that I should like to go up to London and study under one of the grand artists, only Daddy could not afford it, and Norman would laugh at me, and make himself disagreeable. I want to be an artist, dreadfully."

Nest opened her eyes wide.

"We must make a beginning, you know. I have just been taking Ben's portrait : my colouring is sadly defective, I fear. Do you draw or paint, Miss Strath?"

"No."

Barbara looked disappointed.

"Not even sketch?"

Nest shook her head. "But Nigel does. Ah, he is so clever! there is nothing he cannot do ; but painting is his forte. He quite lived among the artist set at Rome, and some friends of his—men of note they were too—told mamma that Nigel really had great genius, and that, if it were not for his bad health and want of perseverance, or rather hastiness of finish, he might be a successful artist." Barbara drew a long breath, and Nest went on : "He has a beautiful studio fitted up for him at St. Ronans ; he has quite a suite of apartments to himself there, the best rooms in the house ; and, when he is in the humour for it, he spends half his time in this painting-room."

"And what do you do with your time?"

"Oh! I work a great deal—for the poor, I mean ; I never work for myself ; and I read to Nigel while he paints,—he likes that ; or to mamma when she is *ennuyée*, or has the headache : and I get up all mamma's old lace,—they say I do it better than Mrs. Stevens herself," continued Nest, with a

little innocent pride ; "and sometimes I dress mamma when she goes out, when Mrs. Stevens is away or unwell."

Barbara's lip curled involuntarily. "But have you no life of your own?" she asked, with a shade of pity in her voice.

"No," answered Nest humbly ; "I always seem to be a sort of pale shadow of theirs. But the worst of it is," she added sadly, "I do not feel as though I were quite necessary to either."

"Why not?" inquired Barbara indignantly. "Are they not fond of you?"

"Oh yes, yes," cried Nest, shrinking, nevertheless, at the question ; "they are kinder to me than I deserve. But you see they hardly want me ; they are all in all to each other."

"Is Nigel so attached to your mother, then?"

"Yes, and so proud of her besides ; and she is devoted to him. You should hear them talk sometimes, when Nigel is in one of his moods ; it is beautiful—just like a book ; and he is fond of me too, calls me 'ma mie' and 'mignonne,' and all sorts of pretty names, when he is in a good humour. But you see I am not his friend ; mamma is that."

"Yes, I understand," said Barbara, venturing on a little squeeze of sympathy. She was not then the only one unappreciated at home ; and Nest had not even Leigh.

"I fancy that he does not tell her all his thoughts ; and sometimes they quarrel when their wills clash. Nigel is so spoiled!" continued Nest, with innocent garrulity ; "he has never been crossed in anything, and he rules the house—mamma and me, and every one in it, and no one dares to oppose his authority."

"Tyrants are seldom amiable," observed Barbara curtly.

"He is very fretful and irritable at times. It is trying to bear, of course ; but we know it is from his bad health, and so we put up with it. The worst is, strangers don't like it ; and Nigel is just as impatient and capricious with them as with us, and would give vent to his displeasure before a whole roomful, if he were in a bad humour. And that is what vexes mamma so ; she is all for courtesy and reserve before strangers."

"I think your brother's way the more honest," replied Barbara abruptly ; and, Hester re-entering at that moment, the conversation became more general.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIGEL TAKES UP HIS QUARTERS AT THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE.

"Beseech your majesty,
Forbear sharp speeches to her : she's a lady
So tender of rebukes, that words are strokes,
And strokes death to her."

SHAKSPEARE.

THE conversation became more general, but lost much of its originality. Barbara, who had been expressing herself in a thoroughly Barbaric manner, and who had become somewhat lofty in consequence, now subsided, with a fatigued air, into private life and absolute silence, sewing at her seam demurely, with her forehead wrinkled like an old parchment. Such silence, when accompanied by due expression, is more eloquent than words. Hester felt at once that she had interrupted a pleasing dialogue, and, becoming uncomfortable, worked up a few common-place remarks with difficulty, to which Nest chirruped a few faint answers ; and it was quite a relief when Connie rushed in, breathless and rosy, with a great peacock butterfly prisoned in her hand, and commenced chattering merrily. Nest was no talker ; she was not one to shine in society. A few monosyllabic replies, a stammered out question or two, was all her individuality could assert for itself. Curiosity bewildered her ; brilliancy and repartee reduced her to a state of quiescence ; she shrank from the clamour of tongues and laughter ; a short spasm of wonder, a blank startled look, was all she would ever vouchsafe, before she took refuge in silence that verged on tears.

How well spake the wise king, the moraliser for ages ; yea, with what certain truth and wisdom he has written, "A wounded spirit who can bear ?" Nest bore this wounded spirit of hers so heavily and sorely, that gentle indeed must be the hand that could touch without startling her, that could still the old aching pain and soothe her at the same time. That Barbara had done so, spoke much for the bright quaint womanliness that shone through all the bombast of eccentric girlhood. Neither her abruptness, her odd speeches, nor her curious questions repelled Nest in the least. The poor little loving heart quite sunned itself in Barbara's mirthful smiles. Like the bird to which Norman had compared her, which fluttered its broken wing with

faint chirps and twitters in his warm hands, so Nest had given out to Barbara her innocent stammerings ; her little hesitating answers, her gentle gossip and prattle, thrilled through and comforted, she hardly knew how, by a sense of appreciative kindness.

"I do believe I shall like you ; let us be friends," that impulsive all-girlish outbreak of Barbara's, uttered in a freak of sentiment—why, or for what purpose, the speaker hardly knew herself—would it ever be forgotten by Nest ? Forgotten ? Oh, no ; no one could tell—Barbara least of all—how she would keep those few little words close and warm in her empty heart, hugging them up, hearing them over again and again, listening to them, feeling them, mouthing them aloud in her quiet bed, with happy tears, "I do believe I shall like you ; let us be friends." Two people had been kind to her in her life, and had loved her—her Aunt Lettice and Norman ; but she had been separated from them for years. She had met Norman again, and found him almost a stranger ; good, kind as he had always been, but still a stranger, with a grave bearded face which filled her with astonishment, and only made her long for the boy who had looked so different. And then she had met this girl, who had saved her brother ; this girl—speaking so oddly, yet with such wistful eyes, such beaming smiles ; this girl, who said she liked her, who chose her for a friend. Nest called this her red-letter day, and put a new saint in her calendar, named St. Barbara of Sunningford, and commenced worshipping it with sweet womanly idolatry, like some poor ignorant little Papist that she was.

But she was all a-hungred for love, and would have caught at the veriest shadow that offered itself. She dwelt lonely with her mother and brother, to whom she clung with tender ministries and persistent fondness, who only rewarded her with a capricious kindness, or, worst of all, with their pity.

Nest wronged Nigel a little in her humility ; he was fonder of her than she thought. It is true he made her the safety-valve of his ill-humour, and teased and monopolised her in a breath ; but he had a brother's love for her for all that, and he had some sort of dim notion that she was above them both, and lived in a wondrous simplicity and purity of her own ; and sometimes his heart went out to her quite pitifully, when he saw her poor little figure gliding about in the heartless crowd, a mark for the world's criticism and contempt. One day he took his mother to task about her, and they had a battle-royal

over her, in which Nigel vowed he would not have her dragged about at their heels, like some pale shadow. She should have her peace undisturbed, and remain at home; and Nigel, as usual, had his way.

And Nest locked up her jewels in high content, and wore all her pretty dresses at home. But Nigel never vaunted his victory as he might have done, and so Nest was quite ignorant that she owed her liberty to him.

The life and the gladness had quite died out of her face now, as she sat straightening her bent chest as she best could, and uttering little timid monosyllables to Hester's remarks. By and by Connie's chatter filled up the lapses of silence, and Hester, full of pity, yet marvelling almost to contempt, left off questioning the shy stranger, and gave her attention to her young sister; while Barbara gave out bright glances by the score, and read Nest's history with eager scrutiny.

Nest, left to herself in a relieved silence, twisted her hat nervously, shook back the showers of pale hair that incommoded her, and fell to admiring Hester with all her might.

Hester's straight profile and drooped lashes, the smooth glossy hair and beautiful mouth, just curving into a smile at Connie's nonsense, Nest noted it all, and dwelt on every feature admiringly, and then looked from each to each of this new sisterhood, looking longest at brown puckered Barbara.

Barbara felt the scrutiny, and, to end it, spoke sententiously: "You won't set the house on fire with your wisdom, Connie. What rubbish you are talking!"

Connie, feeling herself affronted, curled her lip at Barbara, and then screwed her little round face into as perfect a facsimile of Barbara's eight-piled frowns as she well could. Hester and even Nest laughed.

"Oh, you absurd child," said Hester; but her voice took caressing tones. Barbara, whose eyes were fixed on her seam, neither saw nor appreciated the joke. She sewed on terribly, while Connie, full of mischief, flourished an imaginary needle, and sewed airy stitches by the score. The likeness was so complete that Hester laughed again.

"It is 'great cry, little wool,'" observed Barbara; "when I see the joke I will laugh too," which unconscious remark reduced Connie to a state of convulsions. Barbara's provoked pout was irresistible. In another moment there would have been an explosion of a most fiery nature, but Hester held up a warning hand.

"How silly we all are. Be quiet, Connie. Barbara, don't look so cross. I think I hear Lady Strath." Nest thought she heard the same; so did Connie. Barbara, who was near a sulk, became obstinate in a moment, and argued loudly that it was Daddy.

"I never knew that Daddy rustled like that," began Connie absurdly, when the door opening reduced her to silence.

"I told you it was Daddy," called out Barbara triumphantly, in her loudest voice, as her father appeared with Lady Strath.

"We are both right, as it happens," returned Connie, with a little burst.

"Hush!" whispered Hester, and Dr. Heathcote looked at them both in rather displeased surprise. Such a look as that from her father would awe Barbara in her wildest and most mutinous humours.

Nest meanwhile rose, and looked timidly at her mother. There was a flushed, almost a vexed look on Lady Strath's face. She seemed disturbed—"put out," as the ordinary phrase is. Her well-gloved hands closed tightly over each other. Nest knew the action well. The doctor's face wore its usual pleasant smile.

"My dear madam, you must not let this trouble you. It need not cause you a moment's uneasiness; it is only a whim on my patient's part."

"It is a very troublesome whim," returned Lady Strath, in an annoyed voice, "and places me in a very awkward position. Who would have thought he would have taken such an absurd notion into his head? I never knew him set himself in such direct opposition to my will before. And you took his part, doctor;" this reproachfully.

"Pardon me, Lady Strath, I had no such intention. I was quite of your opinion, but I was obliged to put a stop to the argument when I saw how he was exciting himself. Did you not notice how he flushed up in an instant?"

"Oh, he always colours up like that when he is set upon anything; but I never knew him so unreasonable before, and to his mother too;" and Lady Strath put up her handkerchief to her eyes.

Dr. Heathcote's sympathy was not to be mistaken. Nest put a timid hand on his arm, and begged him to tell her what was amiss; his kind eyes reassured her in a minute.

"It is nothing, my dear, a mere nothing; only your mother seems to have taken it to heart. She wished the carriage to

be sent for your brother to-day, or to-morrow at the latest, to take him to St. Ronans. And to-morrow Dr. Strath and I know there would not be the slightest risk in the world in so moving him. But my patient thinks he knows better than all of us, objects to the arrangement, declares the risk to be excessive, and, full of absurd theories and whims of his own, intends to remain here till he is well."

"Poor Nigel! poor, poor mamma!" broke from Nest. She understood it all in a moment. "Oh, do go and tell him, Dr. Heathcote, that he is very selfish and wrong in acting like this. Mamma will not sleep; she will be miserable if he is away from her, now he is ill. Oh, do go and work on his feelings: it is so cruel and wrong to mamma!"

It was clear Lady Strath was distressed in no ordinary way; her face grew excessively pale, and she sobbed quite audibly. Hester begged her to sit down, and fetched her some wine, and made womanly fuss over her. Dr. Heathcote smiled approbation at his daughter, signed Barbara away, and patted Nest gently on the shoulder.

"We must not be too hard on your brother while he is ill. I expect he is a spoilt child, and must be treated as one. He has talked himself into a fever; nothing that I can say will do any good. And Dr. Strath, who would have more influence, is away; besides, after all, what does it matter? Lady Strath can leave him comfortably in my care, I hope."

"It is not that," began Lady Strath, in great distress. "Miss Heathcote, you understand, I am sure. It is the thought that he prefers strangers to his own mother, who has nursed him through so many illnesses. But there, he was always capricious. Once he preferred his own valet to me, and would not let me come near him. And yet he is so good to me when he is well."

It was impossible not to pity Lady Strath: Hester did from her heart. Even Barbara grew pitiful.

"You must allow for the fancies of a sickly youth," began the doctor soothingly. He was rather scandalised himself at Nigel's cool reception of his mother, and the way in which he had set her wishes at defiance; he could not understand such pure selfishness. Leigh would never have done such a thing; but, then, no one ever did understand Nigel's eccentricities. He afterwards owned that it was the queerest and vaguest whim that kept him at Dr. Heathcote's; but he never gave it a name. Barbara was the last to guess at it.

The doctor began his soothing speech, but Lady Strath interrupted him :

"I have over-indulged him, and I must take the consequences," said she, sighing. "But look at the position in which such conduct places me. I am already indebted to you and your daughter for the care lavished on him, and now I shall be indebted tenfold ; and I tell you candidly," continued Lady Strath, with a little natural dignity, "I do not care to incur such weighty obligation to strangers whom I can never hope to repay."

"Oh, we shall be repaid over and over again," replied Dr. Heathcote gaily. "Don't be uneasy on that score. Your son will be first-rate friends with us. A new face is quite a boon in this place ; and if my daughter minds a little extra trouble in the house, she is not the girl I think her. The only fear is, Mr. Nigel Strath will grow so weary of his homely quarters and male attendants, that he will walk himself off one day in my absence, minus the carriage, and then you'll be blaming us all."

Lady Strath smiled faintly. "I shall send Johnson to him ; and you will be obliged to put up with a great deal of my society, for I must see him every day. Nest, child, where are you ? Nigel asked to see you for a minute—only for a minute, mind ; and don't tell him anything to excite him, remember,—just 'How do you do ?' and 'Good-bye.'"

Nest felt a little flutter of strangeness as she entered the chintz room ; but its old-fashioned cosiness reassured her, and she stepped quite nimbly round the great four-post bed, with its chintz canopy of sprawling convolvulus and pink-tipped daisies ; with Nigel lying on a heap of pillows in the middle, with his thin flushed face and bandaged hand, and great crimson roses nodding in at the window at him, carrying long trails of ivy after them.

Nest thought he looked very comfortable, and ceased to wonder at his whim. She liked it better than any room at St. Ronans. It was more homely—homely in its true sense. She would wish almost to lie there herself ; but then Nigel would not have Barbara to wait on him : there was room for pity in that.

She flung back her long hair now, and leaned over him, and gave him sweet timid kisses, half fondling, half tearful, till Nigel—but not unkindly—pushed her away. "It is so hot, Nest," he said, in extenuation. Nest drew back under the

shadow of the curtain, and propped herself up against the bed-post, and looked out at him with brimming eyes, but quite content. She was used to be pushed away, and his tone was very gentle ; but it became less so after a minute.

"Are both the windows open? What a fever I'm in! I wish I had Johnson to fan me. Tell the madre to send the large green fan with him when he comes this afternoon. Do you hear, Nest? Well, I would not have sent for you if I had known you were going to cry and make a fuss, when you know I hate it so."

"I know you do, dear," she answered, brushing away the tears with her hand and smiling at him cheerfully,—such a wet glittering face. "But, oh! I am so glad and so sorry, Nie! So sorry for the poor wounded hand; and so glad, so thankful, for the escape. If I were one of those poor peasant-women, I should go and burn a candle before my patron saint, out of gratitude, you know, as we saw them do at that funny little chapel in the valley. Don't you remember, dear?" This was how Nest carried out the style of conversation inculcated by her mother.

"Remember! of course I do. What queer ideas you have, Nest. Well, how do you like the Miss Heathcotes? Have you made friends with them yet? One of them, I saw last night, is a very handsome woman. She lighted us when Norman was helping me upstairs, and the candle shone full on her face. For all my faintness, Nest, I could not help thinking I should like her to sit to me for a Madonna." His face looked quite eager as he spoke.

"You never forget you are an artist, Nigel."

Nigel turned away from the implied flattery. "I should like to have a good look at her by daylight. What sort of a complexion has she?"

"I don't know," said Nest timidly; "but she is very, very handsome, Nie; and mamma seemed to admire her too."

"More than she did the other one, then, 'the little brown girl,' as she called her. Well, she is no beauty, certainly. How fares the little Samaritan?"

That name seemed to cling to Barbara.

"I like her face better than Miss Heathcote's," maintained Nest staunchly, quite ignoring the question. "It is not pretty, but it changes so. Miss Heathcote's is very handsome, but it is always the same."

Nigel looked at her with superb disdain, and fairly laughed.

"What an idea, Nest! Why, the Samaritan was quite a caricature, as far as I could judge. When she came up to me at the stile, I declare I thought for the first minute it was a rough-headed child with an old face. For all the world it reminded me of nothing but a bright-eyed bird caught in a furze-bush."

Nest stood and wondered. "What a pretty simile; but you are so clever, Nie!"

"I did not mean it to be pretty," he returned, mollified by the compliment, in spite of her bad taste. "Still, it is not fair to criticise in this case. 'Handsome is as handsome does.' And she did me a good turn, out and out, this Miss Barbara. Barbara, too. What an ugly name!"

"Connie—that's the youngest sister, such a pretty little thing—calls her 'Bab.'"

"Bab! Well, that's good: curtly euphonious. Bab, Baby, Babchen, Babette, Barbaretta. What a host of names one could concoct out of that mouthful of a word 'Bab.' Well, Barbara for me."

Nest wondered a little more, and then grew red at the notion that Nigel was laughing at her favourite.

"Oh, Nigel, I do assure you she is the dearest, brightest little creature in the world, and talks, oh! so beautifully!"

"Indeed! Well, give my love to her—my kind regards to the young one, and my compliments, my very respectful compliments, to Miss Heathcote. Mind, my love to the Samaritan."

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind, Nigel. I wish you would not talk so; some one will certainly overhear your nonsense."

"Miss Strath!" called out a shrill little voice through the keyhole; "your mother is asking for you, Miss Strath."

The brother and sister interchanged looks of mock dismay. "The Samaritan, by all that's good! Talk of the, etc. Humph! it is a young lady in question, so I must not finish my sentence."

"Miss Strath!" the shrill voice waxed impatient, and Nest darted to the door and opened it. There stood Barbara, rosy and mischievous, her hair looking as though a stiff breeze had

passed through it since they last met. "Oh, you are wanted, please," said Bab, as demure as any kitten.

"Tell mamma I am coming. I will just bid Nigel good-bye; but you startled us so, calling through the keyhole. I only hope you did not hear any of our nonsense."

"Of course not," cried an indignant voice from the bed. Barbara turned rosier than ever, and fairly danced down the passage with a little burst of laughter; and what she said to herself was, "Well, Barbara for me; give my love to the Samaritan," those being the two sentences that reached her before she covered up her ears and called through the keyhole.

Nest bade a long lingering good-bye, tied on her straw hat, and came into the Harlequin room her own subdued self again, only she looked round wistfully for Barbara.

But Barbara had no look for her. She was at her seam again, sewing away for the dear life. For quicker despatch of business, she had even laid aside elegance, and had pinned the work to her knee; her face was more puckered up than ever, and her eyes screwed and fixed on the square inch before her. Lady Strath wished her a most gracious good-bye, and Barbara rose to respond to it. Hester was scandalised at seeing her drag unseemly lengths of calico half across the room. Connie smiled, but Barbara's serenity remained unimpaired.

"Good-bye, Lady Strath: you quite overwhelm me with your thanks. Good-bye, Miss Strath. Connie, open the door for Lady Strath." Hester moved stiffly across the room; but, happening to look round for a moment with displeased eyes, she saw Barbara and her work, a confused white bundle, on the floor—a bundle which rocked itself mid little bursts of laughter—"Give my love to the Samaritan."

CHAPTER XIV.

NEST'S SERMON.

"For me, my heart that erst did go
Most like a tired child at a show,
That sees through tears the mummers leap,
Would now its wearied vision close,
Would, childlike, on His love repose,
'Who giveth His beloved sleep.'"

E. B. BROWNING.

NEARLY a week passed before Nigel Strath consented to make his appearance downstairs. During all that time he had set his mother and doctors at defiance, and, in spite of disparity of numbers and an overwhelming show of reason on the one side, maintained his position by the mere force of will. In vain his mother coaxed and entreated, Dr. Heathcote argued, and Norman stormed; Nigel gave out that he was seriously ill, and that no English doctor understood his case—had a headache one day, faintness the next, and a feverish cold the third; harassed his nurses for fresh remedies, or tried some of his own; bewildered his valet by the multiplicity of symptoms engendered every morning, and all at once, when Dr. Heathcote was really afraid that there must be some serious mischief at work, declared himself well, and, though he had never looked so ill since the first evening of his accident, announced his intention of evacuating his sick-room for the rest of the day. Norman shrugged his shoulders when Johnson told him, and made a great face of disgust. He had long ceased arguing with Nigel; but as soon as he found out that sheer obstinacy and caprice influenced the young hypochondriac, and perhaps the desire to exercise his will over a strange household, he flatly refused to enter his cousin's room again under any pretext whatever; and as Nigel found his company indispensable, perhaps this stringent treatment had more to do with overcoming his sick fancies than any one guessed, though he kept himself shut up on principle for a day or two longer.

Norman was quite aware why Nigel pined and suffocated in his hot room some thirty-six hours after he was quite ready to seek cooler regions elsewhere. Norman was a bit of a philosopher in his way, as well as a cynic. He made up queer faces

to himself in the surgery. Barbara coming in once or twice was reminded of the nodding mandarin in her den upstairs, with the grotesque little idol that leered beside it. She thought Norman grew uglier every day, but he grimaced worse than ever when her back was turned.

It was wonderful how Nigel in his sick-room ruled the household. Hester grew quite humble in her housewifery, and she and Susanna the cook, who were always at daggers drawn in matters of the hearth and spit, ceased rivalry, and united in efforts to outshine themselves. The great difficulty was to keep the house quiet, which with uncarpeted stairs and slamming doors was rather an impossibility. Leigh used to take off his boots and creep about, out of respect to the invisible guest; Hester drew her dress round her; and Connie and the housemaid gave laborious creaks, with hushed breath and lowered heads; Barbara alone turned restive, ignored headaches, scoffed at the idea of nerves, and scuttled up and down stairs twenty times a day, calling to Ben, and whistling her loudest; but, strange to say, Nigel, who declared a footstep jarred on him, never complained or remonstrated, and only smiled his queer half-smile when the whistle invaded his silence.

"I wonder who is the bird that twitters so loudly in the early morning," he said once, as he lay with half-shut eyes on the couch; and Nest, who was sitting by him, answered, with a little suppressed fun:

"The same that was caught in the furze-bush, Nie;" and then they both burst into a laugh, much to Lady Strath's surprise.

Nest had long delicious talks with Barbara in the little summer-house or under the big walnut-tree; sometimes they chatted for hours; they were growing fast friends in their mutual interchange of thought and feeling, and Nest began to think Barbara the noblest creature in the world. She used to tell Nigel so, and prattle to him about their talks together, much to his amusement.

Nest had seen her Aunt Lettice the day after they had been at Heathcote House. Her mother called at Oakleigh Cottage, and took Nest with her; but it was a cold uncomfortable sort of visit. Her mother had been very gracious, but Aunt Lettice looked embarrassed, and out of spirits; and what made matters worse was, that Norman had stood by all the time, frowning and ill at ease. Nest had never seen him look so little to advantage.

It was a miserable failure of a visit, and Nest had a good cry over it that night; but two or three days afterwards she and Barbara went to spend a long afternoon, and Nest had felt in Paradise; for all the coldness had vanished out of Aunt Lettice's face, and she had taken her in her arms and wept over her; and Nest had shed happy tears in her old place, and afterwards they had a long, long talk of past days. Barbara felt a little jealous that evening; it was not quite pleasant to see Nest's fair head resting where hers loved to lie. She said over and over to herself that Mrs. Strath was thinking of her dead Lily, and that of course her brother's child must be closer to her than she was; but it would not do; her eyes grew quite large and dark with her pain, and by and by she said quite quietly: "My place is taken; I am thinking you do not want Barbara now."

Nest uttered a little exclamation, and Mrs. Strath turned round; but her jesting smile was gone in a moment, when she saw the girl's face; she only squeezed it lovingly between her hands.

"Not want my little Barbara—my adopted child! What! jealous, darling? Lie there, twin daughters;" and Mrs. Strath drew Bab's brown head close to Nest. Norman, entering at this moment, paused to look at the unwonted sight.

"Your arms are full to-night, mother," he said smiling, and he reached his hand to Barbara.

Barbara sat up, and laughed the tears into her eyes. "If you are my adopted mother, Mrs. Strath, Norman must be my brother," she said lightly.

Norman dropped her hand, and turned away; and Barbara remembered afterwards that he never spoke to her during the remainder of the evening.

Nest spoke to Barbara once about her deformity. Barbara never forgot that talk. It was one Sunday afternoon. Bab had played the truant from church, she was going down to her cathedral in the fir-woods, she said; and she questioned Nest's face with wistful eyes; Nest, who had a headache, nodded, half smiling and half sad; and so they went off together, Ben, as usual, accompanying them.

There was a low green hollow just on the outskirts of the plantation, by the bracken path, which was Barbara's favourite resort. She usually called it the green nest; but to-day it was the porch, and she pointed out to Nest the long dusky aisles of the firs, full of golden light, and asked whether she did not

like it better than the red-baized family pew in the village church.

"Is not everything perfect?" she continued eagerly. "We have our choristers, only they are singing in the distance; and we do not want incense—just smell the faint aromatic perfume, the sunshine seems to wave it to us in golden censers—it is sweeter far, I am sure, than in any of the old cathedrals you describe."

"It is very sweet," said Nest dreamily, and she smiled a little, as she always did at Barbara's fantastic ideas; but she said softly to herself that it was very beautiful too, and then they began to talk by a natural transition of ideas, about the glorious ritual of the unseen Temple where Nest hoped to worship by and by. Barbara never knew why she talked as she did that afternoon; she said afterwards that the incense of the pines had got into her head, and made it misty with far-away images. But after all she did not say much; she listened to Nest, and, as she told Leigh, Nest talked and looked like a little white angel that had strayed away and lost its wings, and went wandering up and down the earth, seeking them vainly, that she might fly away.

"And where are your wings, Barbara?" Leigh asked jestingly.

And Barbara answered thoughtfully: "I've got a pair of eagle's plumes somewhere, and some day I mean to have a look at the sun;" but, then, no one understood what Barbara meant by her queer sayings.

Nest went wandering up and down the white-robed multitude that no one can number, but presently she came down to earth again. Barbara had said a word that jarred upon her. There was a little discord somewhere, a vague question or two, a fatigued sigh, and Bab's eagle plumes were trailing in the dust.

"How can you talk so?—you have never been there. I cannot follow you so high."

There were long trails of green mist round them now, and down one dim aisle a wondrous altar-light was kindled, flaming blood-red in the distance; thin shadows beset it almost like waiting ministers; and then Nest spoke on in a low voice, and told Barbara all her heart.

She spoke of an empty and wasted life, yet without a word of reproach to the living. She unfolded her reserve; she spoke of her deformity as her cross, and of the bruised and heavy

heart that carried it, lamenting over herself as one ordained to suffer. Barbara's soft heart grew tender and pitiful in a moment.

"Oh, Nest!" she cried; "how can you bear it? How can you—how can you?"

"I could not, dear, in my own strength; I am too weak and timid for that. Ah, I have suffered so! But He is merciful, Barbara; 'for so He giveth His beloved sleep.' Do you know those words? I often whisper them to myself; they bear a different meaning to me, I think, than they do to others."

"How do you mean?" asked Barbara, in an awe-struck tone. This was not like cant at all; but somehow it oppressed her terribly.

"I mean, He gives us sleep—sleep of the mind in our pain sometimes—when we are sorrowful in our desolation. Ah! such desolation, Barbara, as, thank Heaven, you will never know. When we go down into the wilderness after Him, as it were, and all the thorns wound us and make us bleed, He just takes us up in His arms, and lulls and deadens the pain, as a mother cradles her sick child. We cease to weep; we at times cease to suffer. We are folded into rest, like tired children with the tear-stains on their faces. Ah yes, indeed; 'for so He giveth His beloved sleep.' Do you never feel this, Barbara?" and the pure brightness of her face was like nothing Barbara had ever seen. She leaned towards her now, too moved to speak.

Nest went on in the same subdued tone:

"When I am very, very unhappy—when I have been out, you know, in the great glittering crowd,"—here Barbara saw her shudder—"when the room has felt all eyes, and every voice has seemed full of jeering pity, 'Look at the poor hunchback girl! how well her brave fineries become her!—jewels and deformity together!' Don't look so sorry, Barbara. I have heard that speech over and over again."

"You are not hunchbacked, Nest," cried Barbara indignantly. "You are hardly deformed. No one who loved you would find out much amiss; Norman has said so, and Hester too." And Barbara held out her arms, and made little loving plaint over her.

"How you comfort me!" said Nest, drying her eyes; "but I must not believe you. I cannot straighten my poor back or chest, Barbara; and not even my long hair can prevent your seeing what a crooked little thing I am."

"You are beautiful to me," returned Barbara, lying tenderly, as a true woman will. "Nor is it only my partiality; for Sir Geoffrey told me how sweet and gentle he thought you."

The sensitive blush flitted over Nest's face, and then it wore a touchingly humble look. Again Barbara watched her in grieved silence, then she took to playing with the long curls, and by and by she said:

"What is it you do when you are very unhappy, Nest? I interrupted you as usual."

"I had forgotten what I said. I was only just going to add, I believe, that when the bitterness and pain are too heavy for me to bear—to bear with my own strength, I mean—I just kneel down and tell Him all."

"Him, Nest? Whom do you mean?" asked Barbara doubtfully, and then she grew ashamed of her question.

"Who do I mean? Why, our dear Lord, to be sure. The only Friend who is never tired of listening to us. And sometimes, when I am kneeling for a long time in the darkness, and still the pain and the bitterness won't pass for the surge of impatient thoughts, I fancy—but I am wearying you, Barbara; I perplex you?"

"You perplex me, certainly; but go on. What do you fancy?"

"That I see Him sometimes stealing towards me in the darkness"—and here Nest's voice grew low and awe-struck—"with a pale halo round Him, just as you see in the old pictures, the dim outline of the cross in His arms; and, oh! sometimes there is blood and tears on His face."

"You must be dreaming," said Barbara, startled, and moving uneasily in her place. Nest kept her eyes fixed on the burning altar-fires, and went on:

"It is only fancy, you know; but sometimes I dream it, and then it is so vivid and so true. He never speaks, not even in my dreams; but He looks—just as I should fancy he looked at Peter, and holds His cross towards me—holds it ever before me."

"Well?" said Barbara, still doubtfully.

"Don't you see? it is such a mute beautiful reproach. I have laid down my cross, as it were, and am shuddering and weeping over it—spurning it from me with bitter thoughts, and He died on His, Barbara."

"I know," she answered, and she bent down her head upon

her knees, in her old way, to hide her face. These simple words of Nest's seemed to hurt and pain her like that stroke of the two-edged sword they read about in church. This girl, so simple, so far below her in intellect, in strength, and even in power, seemed as far removed above her now as if she were in verity the white-winged angel to which Barbara had compared her.

And the green mist turned pearly white, and clung round the tree-stems; and the fires burned luridly, and scattered crimson embers here and there. Nest sat with hands folded on her white dress, and her hair fell like a shadow behind her. Neither spoke for a long time, till Barbara raised her flushed face, and asked abruptly:

"Where did you learn all this?"

"Where did I learn all this? Who taught me, you mean."

"Yes, yes," answered Barbara impatiently. "I suppose you had a good clergyman?"

"I don't know what you call good. I suppose we had before we left England, but I don't know much about them. Old Mr. Delamere, who prepared me for confirmation, was the only one who spoke to me, and he only heard me my Catechism."

"I daresay not," answered Barbara, with a curled lip. "What's your name, N. or M., etc."

"He explained little bits out of it to me, but he did not do much for me. I am afraid I shall shock you dreadfully, Barbara; for the person who helped me most was a Roman Catholic priest."

Barbara sat up straight. All the rigid virtue of thorough-going Protestantism, eked out by Puritan censure, sat throned on her frowning brow and closely-locked mouth. This girl, who knew nothing of religion but its name—to whom the Church was anything but a nursing mother, and who droned out weary Sundays, mouthing words without prayer—looked down indignantly on the other, who had got her sweet piety, so she owned, from a Roman priest.

"I don't understand you, Nest," she said coldly.

Nest could not forbear a little laugh. "There, I said you would be dreadfully shocked. How disdainful you look, Barbara; but you should never judge without hearing. I will tell you all about it, but you must not let any one else know."

"I am not given to chattering people's secrets," returned

Barbara stiffly ; "but I do not care to hear about this. I own, you disappoint me, Nest." Barbara's back and chest would have done honour to years of back-board. Some people's virtue is always straight-backed. Nest gave another soft little laugh, as she laid her hands on Barbara's mouth ; but she flushed up a little too.

"You know we were on the Continent a great many years, and Sundays abroad are great mistakes, I find. Sometimes we attended service at the English Embassy ; sometimes we went to Lutheran and French Protestant churches ; sometimes we were in little out-of-the-way villages, without any other places of worship than the Roman Catholic chapels. These Sundays were very dreary days to me. Mamma and Nigel used to stop at home and read to each other ; but sometimes I wandered about the village, and strayed into the different chapels, just out of curiosity, you know. There was one little seaside village in the south of France where we stayed some weeks, Pierre-du-Point it was called, and I took a great fancy to the chapel there. It was a little fisherman's chapel, built upon a cliff, and dedicated to Our Lady of the Bleeding Heart." (Barbara's look of magnificent astonishment was a thing to see ; but Nest did not notice it.) "I used to stroll up there on Sunday. It was such a pretty sight to see the women, in their clean caps and gaily-coloured kerchiefs, and long gold earrings, clambering up the cliffs, and all turning into the dark little chapel. I used to turn in too sometimes, and wander about, looking at the pictures, and watching the women kneeling at the gaudy shrines. They used to bring all sorts of strange offerings in their hands, to propitiate their patron saints."

"And you patronised these idolaters ; you stood and looked at them. For shame, Nest."

"I looked at them, certainly ; but it was no shame. They knew no better, poor things ; and there was one woman I used to notice, whose husband was wrecked some time afterwards, and whose body was washed ashore one terrible night. She would go and cry before one special shrine for hours, it seemed to me, with her lips just moving, and the tears streaming down her coarse weather-beaten face ; and when she had been kneeling a long, long time, such a happy bright look used to come over her ; and once I heard her say as she rose, 'Oh, the Blessed Mother ! I know Jacques will return safely.' Don't look such unutterable things, Barbara ; it was her religion, you know. And after all the Blessed Mother did not help her, for

Jacques was drowned, and came to shore with his face so battered and bruised that she could hardly recognise him."

Barbara motioned her to go on.

"But there was another woman I was far more interested in—a little *gouvernante* from a neighbouring town, who had lost father and mother, and who had brought down her sick sister for the benefit of the sea air. They lodged at a little white cottage under the cliff. She used to come every day toiling through the hot sun up the steep cliff, to kneel before the rough crucifix, and say her prayers. I was more interested in her, because it seemed to me that her prayers were less likely to be wasted; but I wondered at her too. One day I was feeling very sad, and I sat down to rest on one of the wooden chairs in the cool porch and watched her. I felt inclined to kneel down and pray too. The tears were just coming when I felt some one stop beside me, and I looked up and saw an old grey-haired priest I had often noticed, whose eyes rested on me with a most benignant expression. On seeing my emotion, he sat down beside me. 'Thou weapest, my child,' he said, in French; 'and yet the Mother of Sorrows waits to comfort thee.' His words jarred on me. 'I am a Protestant, father,' I interposed quickly—'what you call a heretic. That girl who has the sick sister, and prays so long before the crucifix, is she praying to the painted wood to save her sister?' The doubt had been in my mind all day.

" 'Thou speakest the language of all Protestants, my child,' he replied, smiling, yet looking a little distressed, I thought; 'but you treat my poor Annette as though she were a heathen, and not a good Catholic. Lookest thou, Daughter, Annette worships the Unseen—the Crucified, whose semblance is before her; and she looks at it lovingly, for it is the likeness, as it were, of her Beloved. It fixes and raises her thoughts: they cannot wander. Look how she embraces and covers the pierced feet with her tears! If thou couldst look into her heart, *ma petite*, thou wouldst see she was far away. She imagines the supper-room—herself the Magdalene.' I drew a little closer to the good priest. 'Father, I wish I could feel as she does, though I am a Protestant! I do not love: all my life long I have fought with shadows.'"

Barbara caught her breath. "Did you say that, Nest?"

"Ay, I did; and it went up like a bitter cry from my heart. He was a good man. He understood me, Roman

priest as he was. He took my trembling hand : he led me straight to the Crucified."

"Impossible !" muttered Barbara.

"Why impossible ? I will not deny that he said much of which you might disapprove ; but I knew enough of the errors of Rome to weed it out. During the two long talks I had with him, he neither shook my faith in my own Church nor forced my reason blindfold. He was a simple curé—a faithful priest who loved his Master ; and so he took the poor little heretic to Him, and left me to His teaching. I think, perhaps, if I had remained longer, he would have tried the effect of argument ; but, as it was, he knew I was to leave in the next day or two, and so he was content to soothe my grief in the only way he could. There, leave off frowning, Barbara. See, all your altar-fires are out, and nothing but grey shadows round us. Hester will be wondering what has become of you ; and it is time, too, for me to go back to St. Ronans."

Barbara rose stiffly, and shook herself from head to foot, like a half-drowned terrier, and then she faced about steadily.

"You are not really shocked, Barbara ?"

"No, not now ; but I feel—I cannot tell you how. You have made me ache all over."

Nest went close to her, and took her hand ; and what she whispered in the twilight was this :

"I hope that you may never be comfortable, never cease from that ache again, till God's dear truth comforts you."

"Thank you," said Barbara, half touched, half proud ; and then she turned away. But all down the bracken path, all through the long garden way, for many a day and many a long silent night, Nest's words came back to her ; she felt them burn into heart and memory, and fought against them, and knew in the deepest depths of her heart that they were true, and that she, like her friend, should also struggle to the light through the long dark of pain.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEREIN NIGEL TURNS CRITIC.

“Better far pursue a frivolous trade by serious means,
Than a sublime art frivolously.

You
Choose nobler work than either, O moist eye,
And hurrying lips, and heaving heart?"

AURORA LEIGH.

BARBARA had rather a surprise the next day.

She had been gathering flowers in the front garden, and had filled her straw hat and apron quite full, and was just stepping through the low French window into the Harlequin room to sort and arrange them at leisure, when she found herself fairly barricaded out in the most unexpected way; for the old-fashioned couch, which usually stood in a recess, was lumbering its unwieldy length right across the open window, and on its heap of tempting cushions lay her new acquaintance, Nigel Strath, fast asleep.

The other window was shut. It seemed a pity to disturb him, and it was very hot out there in the sun ; so Bab sat down on the terrace, just underneath the shadow of the eaves, and began staring at him with all her might. He was lying in an easy boyish attitude, one arm under his head and his bandaged hand laid carefully on his breast ; his light hair clung damply round his temples, and his face looked rather too thin and worn for so young a man ; but it was a beautiful face for all that—almost faultless as regards features ; and so Barbara looked and admired, and then fell to sorting and tying up her flowers—a breast-knot for herself, a garland for Ben, and sundry dainty bouquets for the Dresden vases—perfectly ignorant all the time that her cool survey had been instinctively felt, and was being now repaid with interest.

Nigel was not asleep; he was only in that torpid semi-somnolent state into which people often fall in their weakness. Barbara's little quick-caught breath of surprise, as she peeped over his couch, had fully roused him; and though he still lay with closed eyelids, he had felt her scrutiny all the time, and knew by a sudden intuition it was Barbara; and as soon as she busied herself over her flowers, he raised himself up on his elbow and quietly inspected her.

And he might have had something worse to look at, this bright summer morning. Bab was looking her best to-day; she wore her little nun's dress of soft clinging grey, with just a blue knot to redeem its sameness, and her brown hair rippled over her forehead, and then was tucked back behind her ears. Her head looked as soft and downy as the head of a little bird, and the illusion was helped out yet more perfectly by the bright glancing eyes and the little hands pecking hither and thither among her many-coloured treasures.

And the grey dress, and the blue ribbons, the crimson roses heaped upon her lap, and the downcast girlish face, made up a bright picture together, the whole set in a background of green grass and golden sunshine. Nigel took it all in with his keen artist eyes, and then he yawned and stretched himself; and finding this did not attract her notice, he coughed faintly and shifted his position. Barbara looked up, not a bit startled, and nodded to him. Nigel stretched out his hand with a smile.

"I hope you are really better, St. Ronans," said Barbara, with a cordial grasp. "You have been a long time upstairs, have you not?"

Nigel dropped her hand. "Why do you call me St. Ronans?" he asked, in a tone of simple astonishment.

Barbara reddened all over: the word had escaped her quite unconsciously. It was too late to retract now; besides, Barbara never retracted, on principle. "When you say a wrong thing, stick to it," was her motto; so, instead of backing out of her mistake as well as she could, she stammered out truthfully:

"I call you St. Ronans because it is the name of your house. There is nothing disrespectful in that, I hope."

"Not a bit," returned Nigel gravely; but his eyes had an odd twinkle in them. "It is only rather original."

"But very pretty," pleaded Barbara, still as red as a peony. "Not more so than Nigel Strath, certainly; but somehow, I called you so the first evening we met, and so I got into the habit. Nest likes it. Besides," she continued, with a little laugh, "it is hardly worse than your calling me 'the Samaritan.'"

Nigel coloured, and the queer half-smile flitted over his face. "Some one has been telling tales, Miss Barbara, unless"—with a quick, penetrating glance—"you found the keyhole attractive."

Bab was in a dilemma again ; but this time she hobbled out of it as fast as she could.

"I could not help hearing it, you spoke so loud. I covered up my ears ; I did indeed, St.-Strath."

Nigel found his names irresistible, and burst into a weak laugh. Barbara blushed again, and looked foolish.

"Capital ! I am canonised now. Oh ! how I wish Norman had heard it. No, no, stick to the old sobriquet—it is vastly original ; and I will consent to drop 'the Samaritan,' on one condition."

"What is that ?" asked Bab, still very much ashamed of herself.

"That I may call you Barbara."

Barbara hesitated. She did not care herself, and Nigel was as unconventional as she was ; but what would Hester say ? —Hester, who was always warning her against any familiarity with strange young men. Barbara pondered the question gravely in a little womanish way that made Nigel smile.

"We are a sort of connection," she said, at last, wrinkling her eyebrows at him. "Nest is my friend, and Mrs. Strath is my adopted mother ; and you—I don't quite know how I am related to you."

"That is because you don't trace far enough back. If you look at our mutual genealogy from Eve, you will find out that we are certainly distant cousins, I assure you," he continued gravely. But Barbara, who had been listening with wide-open eyes, shook her head fiercely at him, and told him not to talk so absurdly.

Nigel laughed and looked very penitent, and then he asked her to shake up his hot pillows for him, and give him some cooling drink ; and when she had sat down again, he began in quite an altered voice :

"Do you know, I have been wishing to see you several times since I have been upstairs. You may smile at my calling you the little Samaritan ; but I have never been able to thank you for what you did for me that night. I am afraid I was dreadfully rude and petulant."

"No, not very," answered Barbara candidly. "As I told your mother, I deserve no thanks ; for I did very little, and that little badly."

"There I beg to differ from you entirely. How do you get on with my mother, Barbara ?"

The cool manner in which he brought out her name, and the look with which he accompanied it, made Barbara hot all over.

She quite tingled down to her finger-ends. She grew rather frightened too, and then injured. "Every one treats me as a child," she thought. "I suppose it is true what Hester says, and I have no dignity." She did not know that Nigel was amused and charmed with the delicious, fresh, little piece of originality, who talked and looked so quaintly. To do him justice, he had no idea of her real age. She seemed little more than a child to him; and, after all, few people treated Bab as they did Hester.

The question was an awkward one, especially as Barbara never compromised truth—she felt it so.

"I don't think that question quite fair," said Barbara honestly. "I have seen Lady Strath several times, but have scarcely exchanged a word with her; she seems more taken up with Hester."

"Hester—that is Miss Heathcote, I suppose; my mother admires her greatly, I know. I understand your reticence," he continued slowly, "but I confess it disappoints me: every one gets on with my mother."

"No, not every one; Mrs. Strath does not," exclaimed Barbara, and then could have bitten her tongue for her impudence. Nigel looked at her sharply, but remained silent; a cloud gathered on his brow.

Barbara saw he was displeased; the old proud look came back to his face, all the wonderful geniality had disappeared: nothing wounded Nigel more than to doubt his mother. Bab guessed instinctively at this feeling; she was truly sorry for it, and, as a sort of amends, she took up a great crimson rose and pushed it timidly into his hand; a brown bee followed it, and buzzed round him; the action was simple and child-like, and Nigel's cloud lifted a little.

"What a wholesale slaughter of the innocents! How could you have the heart to behead all these splendid roses?"

Barbara was nibbling at a little bit of grass; she left off, and answered him:

"There are hundreds more in the garden, and hundreds climbing up the house among the ivy. Leigh must mount the ladder for me to-day, and gather some more."

"Pray don't touch that beautiful spray that droops in at my window," he implored, in genuine alarm. "Every morning when I wake they seem to nod at me in so friendly a manner, with their pink dewy cheeks, and they bring long trails of ivy after them till my window is quite framed with young tendrils."

"Leigh says we ought to call the house The Greenery ; it looks like a sweep on May-day, so dusty and so green."

"And who is Leigh, if I may ask?"

"Leigh is my great big brother—ah, such a handsome fellow ; he is tutor to Sir William Travers's only son."

"Is he a dark gipsy-looking fellow, wearing a grey tweed suit?"

"Yes ; have you seen him, and when and where?" asked Barbara eagerly.

Nigel looked amused at her sudden animation.

"I think I must have seen him pass the St. Ronans plantations once or twice : he was standing in the bracken path, I remember, one morning, talking very earnestly to a young woman in a straw hat. I confess I had the curiosity to pass them, though they were so deep in conversation that they did not perceive me. He was a very handsome fellow, as I said ; but it was the woman who struck me most ; she had one of the most attractive faces I have ever seen—very pale, though." Barbara started. "Is she a friend of yours?" he went on inquisitively ; "yet I should hardly think so, for she wore a common print dress, and looked like a respectable sempstress. I think she was asking him the way," he continued carelessly, but with a furtive glance at Barbara.

"Oh, I know whom you mean now," she answered, pretending not to see the look ; "it must have been Ruth Canham, the miller's sister, and our village schoolmistress ; she is a friend of mine, and I am very fond of her. Leigh has taken Rolf once or twice down to the school, and I daresay he was talking to her about the children's treat." Some instinctive jealousy for Leigh prompted her to explain all this so minutely, but the painstaking effort was not lost upon Nigel ; his momentary curiosity seemed past, and he began to yawn again.

"I thought Norman would look in this morning," he observed, by way of changing the subject.

"I wish he would. I am afraid you look tired and dull ; shall I read you to sleep again?"

Nigel caught at the idea with gratitude ; and, after rummaging in the bookcase for a minute, she returned with Tennyson's *Princess* under her arm, and, curling herself up cosily on the rug at his feet, proceeded to read with an air of great enjoyment.

Nigel lay back on his pillows and listened ; large purple and white butterflies floated in at the open window, and a thousand gaudy insects hummed and quivered in the sunlight ; the house-

martens twittered and chirped round the eaves : Nigel lay and watched the shadows and the delicious swaying and rustling of green leaves, and then turned his eyes on the eager reader with a look of quiet content.

Barbara's reading did not please many people, it was too variable, like her moods : sometimes she enunciated her words powerfully and laboriously, a sort of stammer chained her tongue, her voice became subdued almost to indistinctness ; but when she got well into the subject she became rapid, almost shrill ; she threw herself into it, her face worked, her hands gripped each other, her stuttering and hesitation gave way to a clear unbroken flow of words, she acted more than read. Nigel found a charm in these changeful moods ; he thought her face less plain when lighted up with enthusiasm ; in a word, Bab and her reading pleased him greatly. They had a long talk after that. Bab told him about her drawing, and her great longing to be an artist. Both were sorry when the door opened, and Norman came in. It was an interruption, Bab felt, and this was written so legibly on her face that Norman read it. He frowned and grew taciturn in a moment.

"Well, Nigel, how do you feel now ?" and he gave his hand to his cousin, merely nodding to Barbara. "All the better for being downstairs, eh ?"

"I don't know," said Nigel perversely ; "I think I have a little headache."

"A headache ! I daresay you have ;" and Norman looked grimly at the gaily-bound volume in Barbara's hand. "Barbara must keep her poetry and rubbish to herself, and not excite an invalid so early in the morning."

"She is not exciting me," interrupted Nigel, eagerly catching sight of Barbara's discomposed face ; "reading poetry has rather a soothing effect on me than otherwise ; only you are such a matter-of-fact fellow, and can't, or rather won't, understand it."

"I thank Heaven I *am* matter-of-fact, and haven't got my head full of moonshine," he returned sardonically. "Where are Hester and Connie ?" he continued. It was clear the grey dress, blue ribbons, and crimson roses had no charms for him this morning, or he would not have eyed them so savagely. "I would lay any wager they are down at the school."

"You are quite right—you always are," assented Barbara cheerfully ; "yes, Hester is down at the school."

"At her post as usual," he returned meaningly ; and then

turning to his cousin, "what were you and Barbara talking about when I came in?"

He spoke to Nigel, but he kept his eyes scrutinisingly on Barbara; she frowned at the dictatorial tone, but struck in bravely: "St. Ronans was talking about art; and just as you interrupted us, he was asking me to bring down my portfolio of drawings to show him, but I refused, and reminded him he was an invalid, and must be kept quiet."

"It will only amuse me," pleaded Nigel; and Norman, who looked instantly mollified at the explanation, said brightly:

"Yes; after all, you are a better judge than I am of these things, Nigel: I should certainly like you to see Barbara's drawings, for both her father and I are very anxious to know whether she has real talent or not."

Barbara stared at the appropriation implied in Norman's speech, but St. Ronans did not seem to notice it.

"Do fetch your portfolio," he continued, good-naturedly addressing her; "my cousin is a first-rate artist, and will be able to help you; but you must not be surprised if he prove a harder critic than I did."

Bab smiled, and then, nothing loath, hastened away.

In another moment she reappeared, breathlessly tottering under the weight of a portfolio nearly as big as herself. Dr. Strath met her at the door, and took it from her without a word, and quietly installed himself as exhibitor; at which Nigel looked a little surprised and amused, while Barbara leaned on the couch, chin in hand, and watched them.

It was not an encouraging proceeding, she began to quake visibly after the first moment. Nigel took the drawings from his cousin's hand one by one and laid them aside silently with a dissatisfied face: the merest glance seemed to content him, till he came to the last two or three; these he examined more minutely.

"Well?" said Dr. Strath anxiously. Barbara was too excited to speak.

"These last three pictures are very well worked," he observed in a tone of quiet criticism; "the 'Children nutting in the Woods' especially—a good design and very tolerably carried out, only the colouring is rather patchy."

Norman held it up to the light with admiring eyes. "I call it beautiful, Nigel. I should have thought it quite the work of an artist: I told Barbara so."

Nigel's face wore a covert smile. "My dear fellow, you

were always twice as clever as I; but I cannot take your opinion on matters of Art: that requires an education of its own. And now for my criticism: these pictures are very pretty, very pretty indeed; there are capital touches here and there, and plenty of taste and fancy; but," eyeing the girl's downcast face kindly, "I don't think Miss Barbara will ever set the world on fire."

Barbara caught her breath and looked up at him. "Does that mean I shall never be an artist?" she asked humbly; but her eyes were dim with repressed tears. She had hoped so much from Norman's criticism, and now she could see this artist cousin of his derided his taste, and scoffed at his judgment.

"'Never' is a long word;—how old are you?"

"One-and-twenty," she answered, without the slightest hesitation; for, contrary to the usual custom of her sex, Barbara was willing to avow her age on all occasions boldly.

"One-and-twenty!" he exclaimed, very much startled; "why, I thought you were barely sixteen." Then, seeing she looked rather offended—Bab never liked to be taken for younger than she was—he went on: "Well, it is never too late to learn, and there is sufficient evidence of talent in your pictures, crude ill-taught talent as it is, to warrant me in telling you that, with care and patience and careful training, you may do something really good in four or five years."

"Four or five years!" exclaimed Barbara in a tone of dismay.

"That is the worst of women geniuses," remarked Nigel, with an impatient assumption of experience that sat oddly on his boyish face: "they think they can achieve without labour, serve without apprenticeship. They forget," continued the young critic, "that every professional man goes through drudgery before he wins success. Yes, in four or five years you may hope to be something of an artist, if you don't rub out your work with your own impatience, as most women do. You are rather a dreamer, and dreamers are seldom workers."

Nigel spoke shrewdly; but he did not know half the truth of what he was saying, nor the nature with which he had to deal. Barbara had more than one side to her character: she had not ripened yet into the full woman; a dreamer, not a worker, the impulse or force of circumstances that drives to action had not come to her yet.

It was not easy to foretell what Barbara would yet become;

she did not know herself. The restlessness of her own nature unsettled her, and made her life monotonous, and at times unbearable ; she said to herself she would do something, find her place in the world, and then sat herself down, with listless hands and brooding brain, and wondered what place that would be. It was one thing to dream of being an artist—fit herself up imaginary studios, and draw from fictitious models ; it was quite another matter becoming that whereof she dreamed. Neither was hers a nature that successful ambition could fully satisfy ; there would be something wanting yet. The artist might achieve success ; but the true woman, that lurked at the bottom of Barbara's heart, would starve and pine fed upon such emptiness.

"Four or five years !" echoed Dr. Strath doubtfully ; "well, it will occupy her, and check restlessness." A brightness came over his face. Nigel did not seem inclined to answer ; the shrewd gleam had died out ; he looked weary, exhausted, somewhat impatient. Dr. Strath saw the look, and hastened to bid him good-bye.

At the door he met Barbara and her portfolio again.

"Don't be disheartened, my child," he said kindly, when he saw her tired face. "Nigel thinks more than he says ; you must not be discouraged."

"Discouraged ; oh no, what does it matter ?—what does anything matter ?" sighed Barbara.

"Do you think the time he mentioned so long, then, Barbara ? I look forward to as many years of weary waiting as you do ; and I am not a patient man."

Bab looked up in his face timidly. "But you are so strong, Norman, so strong and so good ; and I, what am I ?" and she turned away to hide her quivering lip.

"You are my little friend Barbara are you not ?"

"Yes," answered Barbara gravely, but touched notwithstanding.

"Well, friends shake hands ; give me yours. What a little hand it is, Barbara ; there, good-bye, good-bye, my child."

CHAPTER XVI.

BARBARA'S TE DEUM.

"But I could not hide
My quickening inner life from those at watch ;
They saw a light at a window, now and then,
They had not set there : who had set it there ?"

AURORA LEIGH.

BARBARA had not a word for any one during the remainder of the day.

Shortly after Norman's visit Lady Strath and Nest came as usual ; but Barbara, instead of running to welcome her favourite, betook herself to her den, and drawing a bolt across the little door that opened on the stairs, felt herself as inaccessible to the world in general as though she were a hermit in his cell, or Robinson Crusoe in his lonely island.

This complete shutting out of the external world is very necessary to some natures, who thus withdraw themselves from the narrow groove of daily life, for a brief season of refreshment, to indulge in introspection or retrospection, to attain self-knowledge, gain fresh breath and courage for the daily work of life—never less lonely than when alone. Of such a nature was Barbara : solitude was meat and drink to her ; she grew up self-nourished and self-taught, full of vagaries, but true and honest to the core. Never lioness sought her lair more regularly than Barbara her den ; there she fostered her ambition, dreamed dreams, built gorgeous fabrics that melted into thin air before her eyes ; there also she groped after a dim faith, strove after an ideal love, and, finding neither the one nor the other, would cry out on life, and beat her foolish hands together, and then, growing humble as well as wistful, would pray her great unknown Father to take care of little Bab—poor Bab, whom nobody loved or wanted. This little nightly prayer was all Barbara could be said to utter. True, she would read long paragraphs from her little Treasury of devotion, and kneel and fold her hands devoutly as she read ; but the meaningless petitions would pall on her lips as she uttered them ; the words floated in space while her heart formed other thoughts—restless earthly thoughts. And at church it was much the same : she would own herself a miserable sinner in a tolerably loud

voice, and confess she had done what she ought not to have done; but she managed to weave the oddest dreams between the clauses of her petitions, and then feel troubled and ashamed as she rose from her knees only to dream it all over again.

One wonders what Bab's guardian angel thought of those prayers. One could imagine him veiling his sorrowful face at those childish mockeries; perhaps weeping such tears as angels only weep, if it be granted them to lament over our fallen humanity. Ah! as we pray our thoughtless prayers, and walk through the miry byways of hidden sins, do we ever consider the solemn presence that follows us step by step, sorrowful, yet with glittering nimbus round its head, trailing its white wings after us, with its great angel arms ever stretched out to bless and protect us? And we say it does not matter what we do or think when alone—alone! as though it were ever given to man to be alone, when the eyes of all the church triumphant are upon him, and countless censers wave, and countless prayers ascend that haply he may fight and conquer that one little sin of which he says, "Is it not a little one?" Never less alone than when alone: if we could be taught to believe that, surely, then, every chamber would be a holy of holies, kept swept and garnished, strewn with the bitter herbs of penitence, sweet with the incense of saintly prayers—a place where our guardian angel may love to dwell, and not sigh for an absent heaven.

Barbara's room looked very fresh and cool this lovely summer's morning; the white curtains waved to and fro in the breezy open windows; a yellow canary piped and twittered in his green cage on the sill; Barbara's rocking-chair was placed invitingly, with her little table beside it, loaded with books and roses; an unfinished drawing lay on the easel, palettes and brush beside it; and Ben's shaggy length littered up the hearthrug. All was pleasant and home-like, as when she had left it early this morning; but Bab turned wearily away from it all, and went and stretched herself on her little white bed, and felt tired and listless; and buried her head in the pillow, and had a good cry from very heart-sickness and inanition. She could not understand what had happened to her: an hour ago, she had been basking in the sunlight with her flowers, all life and brightness, full of genial talk and pleasantness; and now she was crying like a naughty child without purpose or reason, from sheer fatigue and disgust of herself and life. These sudden revulsions of feeling, unknown to quiet and more self-contained natures, were very common to Barbara: her

impatience did not easily brook contradiction ; she was easily repressed, frozen or thawed, as the case might be ; she suffered more sometimes from a word or a look than a less delicately organised temperament would from a score of hostile speeches : sometimes she flamed up ; sometimes she only fretted in silence ; one never knew how Barbara would take anything.

She had spent happy days after Norman's favourable inspection of her pictures : success seemed then within her grasp ; labour and failure alike distant. Nigel's cool dissatisfied face, his meagre praises, his hints of weary years of work and waiting, had suddenly checked her passionate impulses, had reduced her spirits to zero ; she had felt suddenly numbed with a curious inexplicable feeling of deadness.

"In four or five years you may hope to be something of an artist," the young critic had assured her ; but his looks and words were alike cold. "Something of an artist !" not quite an artist then—only "something of one ;" and then she had succumbed to the creeping chill ; and that only "if her impatience did not rub out her work, as was the case with many women," as he had somewhat cynically added. Barbara thought his criticism hypercritical, but she did not dare to say so. Norman had called her last picture beautiful, and had warmly praised it ; and his eyes had beamed on her with a pleasant approving look, as he did so, that had made her feel great and proud in a moment. But Nigel's eyes had merely gleamed with a cold blue light ; there was surprise in them, a little cool surprise at her design, but no appreciation, no praise, no genuine admiration ; and yet she had craved it of him, feeling him her master, and quite ready to bow down before the young artist—sitting at his feet, as it were—and all to no purpose.

Nigel had disappointed her : she called him cold, satirical—while all the time he had spoken honestly from his conviction, and then, grieved at her downcast face, had cast about in his own mind how he could help her to knowledge, and further her ambitious schemes. He did not think much of her pictures,—they were very faulty ; but he did detect in them, as he said, talent of a certain order, and perhaps power ; he would prove the stuff of which she was made : and then he saw her wince at the mention of years of labour and uncertain fruition. "She is like all women," he said to himself ; "she is like myself—a dawdler, a dabbler in art. We shall neither of us set the world on fire ; but never mind—I will give her a

helping hand ;" and so he cast about in his mind how he might best assist her.

And Barbara thought him cruel, and argued out the matter with feeble womanish tears—not much of a heroine is Bab ! “He reads my nature truly,” she said, crushing in her pillow with feverish hands, and staring at a rim of sunlight that flecked the window-seat. “He sees that I live by impulse, and not by principle ; that I am hot and hasty of purpose, and that I weary and sicken of delay. Am I the one to patiently work out the career he talks about, or fashion my life for myself—to toil and moil long years for a world’s praise, and then, after all, fail to win it ? What do I want ? What is it I desire ? Am I an artist at heart, or am I only a discontented woman ? Where is my place, and how am I to fill it ; and when—and where ?” sighed Barbara. “Or am I, after all, only a little fool, who plays with palette and brushes, and makes believe to be an artist, and knows that her impulsive hands will never achieve anything of value, and do anything for her own good or for others ?” And then she broke into another strain. “Why is it I never feel like any one else, I wonder ?—never talk or look or think as most women do ?—am only Bab, Bab, Bab—a babbler and a dreamer of dreams ? Why is it Connie laughs at me, and Hester is cross with me, and Daddy shakes his head, and even Mrs. Strath looks astonished ? What is it I do that is so different to the generality of people, who live out harmless lives, loved and appreciated ? Why, what am I ?—what am I really but a dissatisfied child—a very discontented lonely child !” sobbed Bab.

She was in a sore strait now of perplexity and fret. This new and sudden disgust of life that seized her, what did it mean—these sad angry clutches at her heart, without rhyme or reason ? There was nothing in Nigel Strath’s cold gentle criticism to warrant such an outbreak. It is no use analysing her feelings. It was with her as with many of us : our thoughts and feelings get jammed together, and locked up in our hearts day by day. Then there is a sudden pressure—an inadvertent word, it may be—something that touches us in our vulnerable part ; and all at once our pent-up feelings break loose. No one understands us—ourselves least of all. We are ashamed, confounded at our own violence ; and yet, after all, it is only the revulsion of nature—one of those internal storms that clear the air and restore us to serenity.

It was so with Barbara. She did not know herself to what a pitch of hope and excitement Dr. Smith's injudicious praise had raised her. She thought more of it than she ought to have done. And Nigel had given her a blow. She had succumbed weakly to it, that was all; but it was Norman's kind look and words that had really opened the floodgates. Never had such gentle word and action from him greeted her. "You are my little friend Barbara, are you not?" Barbara lay and thought now as it presently when she had quieted herself, and all sorts of pleasant warm feelings came over her, and by and by she fell asleep. It was soft fragrant evening when she awoke; the purple shadows were gone from the grass; the breeze came in at the tiny windows, laden with odours; the birds chirped happy good-nights among the trees. Barbara lay unmoving, with heavy eyelids, and wondered why she felt so light and empty, and then remembered that she had had no dinner; and no one knew where she was—thought she was out, perhaps, as she was missing. She began to feel tolerably ashamed of herself and her loved passion. "After all, it was very childish," she thought; and she shook herself, and sprang off the bed, and smiled, and then grew red at the sight of her little pale face, and dashed it with cold water eagerly to freshen it up.

She went downstairs presently with mildly flushed hair and rosy cheeks, and began laughing and talking, and ate in a ravenous manner at tea, supplying every one by her account of her little nap.

"Why I thought you were at Mrs. Smith's," said Eester, quite shocked at her own thoughtlessness, and helping Bob liberally to everything the table contained. "Why, you must be starved, child." Barbara only laughed, and bent over her plate, saying a great many foolish things, as was her wont—all the more that Nigel lay at the sofa in the background, looking on with perplexed eyes. After tea he said he wished to speak to her; and Bob went and sat quite close to him in the twilight. The others left them and went out on the dusky lawn, and a little star glittered out of the soft haze. There was a promise of cool dew on the dusky flowers; the evening breeze fanned her hot face deliciously.

"Barbara, I want to speak to you. I am afraid I discouraged you this morning." And Nigel's voice was soft and gentle. "I did not mean to do that."

"You had perfect right to speak the truth," returned

Barbara, in an unconcerned voice, and she hummed a little air to reassure him. "I don't think I care much about it—about being an artist, I mean. I am not sure it is my true vocation, after all; and I don't want to be a dabbler only."

"There! see what I have done," he returned regretfully. "I have damped your ardour by my severity."

"Do not blame yourself." But Nigel took up her word.

"Well, I do blame myself—I ought to have been more careful; but it is never too late to mend, as I told you before. I have just arranged with the doctor to remain here another week. You all make me too comfortable; and, as I told him, I want to find out what real English domestic life means, by enjoying it myself. Well, as I am here and next to useless, I will just tell you what we will do. You shall bring down your easel, and we will begin in real earnest to-morrow. Your critic shall be your master. Come, do you agree?"

In answer, Bab slid a soft little hand into his in mute gratitude. She did not speak, because she could not. She had been very faithless, and had wept sorely over her own helplessness; and now this stranger had stretched out a generous hand—he had offered himself as her master. Ah! there would be little doubt she would please and astonish him by her progress. She only wanted help and guidance. No more weary useless days. Barbara's hopes cropped up afresh, and blossomed into life at these few words. The lonely little heart felt itself cheered and comforted. Nigel was touched at this simple expression of the girl's feelings, so natural and unconventional; but he said no more. He had undone his harsh criticism, and that was all; and presently Barbara left him and went out on the dim dewy lawn. He could see the faint gleam of her dress winding in and out among the tree-stems, and by and by little low snatches of song reached him. He turned round on his pillow well content.

"It is not much good I have done in my life. Let us do a little while the day lasts." And with these words, an hour later, he composed himself to rest.

But Barbara walked up and down the sweet dewy lawn, and tried to count the stars as they suddenly glittered in the dark blue sky, and then watched the moon as it came slowly out of a great snow-heaped bank of clouds, till the whole garden looked shining and transfigured, and the dusky shadows hid themselves behind trees and under fragrant shrubs, or drew zigzag lines of darkness over the silvered grass.

It was so with Barbara. She did not know herself to what a pitch of hope and excitement Dr. Strath's injudicious praise had raised her. She thought more of it than she ought to have done. And Nigel had given her a blow. She had succumbed weakly to it, that was all ; but it was Norman's kind look and words that had really opened the floodgates. Never had such gentle word and action from him greeted her. "You are my little friend Barbara, are you not ?" Barbara lay and thought about it presently when she had quieted herself, and all sorts of pleasant warm feelings came over her, and by and by she fell asleep. It was soft fragrant evening when she awoke ; the purple shadows were gone from the grass ; the breeze crept in at the tiny windows, laden with odours ; the birds chirped happy good-nights among the trees. Barbara lay tranquilly, with heavy eyelids, and wondered why she felt so light and empty, and then remembered that she had had no dinner ; and no one knew where she was—thought she was out, perhaps, as she was missing. She began to feel tolerably ashamed of herself and her brief passion. "After all, it was very childish," she thought ; and she shook herself, and crept off the bed, and smiled, and then grew red at the sight of her little pale face, and dashed it into cold water angrily to freshen it up.

She went downstairs presently with trimly brushed hair and rosy cheeks, and began laughing and talking, and ate in a famished manner at tea, surprising every one by her account of her long nap.

"Why I thought you were at Mrs. Strath's," said Hester, quite shocked at her own thoughtlessness, and helping Bab liberally to everything the table contained. "Why, you must be starved, child !" Barbara only laughed, and bent over her plate, saying a great many foolish things, as was her wont—all the more that Nigel lay on the sofa in the background, looking on with perplexed eyes. After tea he said he wished to speak to her ; and Bab went and sat quite close to him in the twilight. The others left them and went out on the dusky lawn, and a little star glittered out of the soft blue. There was a promise of cool dews on the thirsty flowers ; the evening breeze fanned her hot face deliciously.

"Barbara, I want to speak to you. I am afraid I discouraged you this morning." And Nigel's voice was soft and gentle. "I did not mean to do that."

"You had perfect right to speak the truth," returned

Barbara, in an unconcerned voice, and she hummed a little air to reassure him. "I don't think I care much about it—about being an artist, I mean. I am not sure it is my true vocation, after all; and I don't want to be a dabbler only."

"There! see what I have done," he returned regretfully. "I have damped your ardour by my severity."

"Do not blame yourself." But Nigel took up her word.

"Well, I do blame myself—I ought to have been more careful; but it is never too late to mend, as I told you before. I have just arranged with the doctor to remain here another week. You all make me too comfortable; and, as I told him, I want to find out what real English domestic life means, by enjoying it myself. Well, as I am here and next to useless, I will just tell you what we will do. You shall bring down your easel, and we will begin in real earnest to-morrow. Your critic shall be your master. Come, do you agree?"

In answer, Bab slid a soft little hand into his in mute gratitude. She did not speak, because she could not. She had been very faithless, and had wept sorely over her own helplessness; and now this stranger had stretched out a generous hand—he had offered himself as her master. Ah! there would be little doubt she would please and astonish him by her progress. She only wanted help and guidance. No more weary useless days. Barbara's hopes cropped up afresh, and blossomed into life at these few words. The lonely little heart felt itself cheered and comforted. Nigel was touched at this simple expression of the girl's feelings, so natural and unconventional; but he said no more. He had undone his harsh criticism, and that was all; and presently Barbara left him and went out on the dim dewy lawn. He could see the faint gleam of her dress winding in and out among the tree-stems, and by and by little low snatches of song reached him. He turned round on his pillow well content.

"It is not much good I have done in my life. Let us do a little while the day lasts." And with these words, an hour later, he composed himself to rest.

But Barbara walked up and down the sweet dewy lawn, and tried to count the stars as they suddenly glittered in the dark blue sky, and then watched the moon as it came slowly out of a great snow-heaped bank of clouds, till the whole garden looked shining and transfigured, and the dusky shadows hid themselves behind trees and under fragrant shrubs, or drew zigzag lines of darkness over the silvered grass.

A nightingale was singing in some woods near ; there was a twittering and stirring of drowsy birds in their nests ; the glow-worm gleamed phosphoric light in the dense shrubberies ; the air was full of sweet laughter—happy voices—Barbara looked up with misty eyes, shamefaced and flushing to herself in the dim light, and sang a "Te Deum" in her gladness.

"I have been very faithless," she said to herself—"cowardly and desponding, too—afraid of myself and my own life ; crying out upon my helplessness. It may be that the Father has sent this aid to me." And then half-wistfully and with strangely unused lips, Bab chanted low snatches of the grand old "Te Deum," "To thee all angels cry aloud." What if invisible voices caught up the first quavering notes of praise that ever fell from Barbara's faulty lips, as she walked up and down the lawn, moved out of herself by the infinite beauty of night—feeling herself strong and comforted—warmed through and through by appreciative kindness, and by the offer of the first helping hand that was stretched over her lonely inner life to teach and guide her !

It would have seemed a slight thing to others, this kindly generosity of Nigel's—a thing to be lightly offered, and lightly accepted, with little question of gratitude or sentiment, but to Barbara it was otherwise—to her it predicted a revolution of her whole life ; it gave promise of changed days and happy work ; it was as though she had been essaying to climb up a rugged mountain unhelped—unguided, and some one who knew the hidden tracks, and was further advanced than she, suddenly stooped down and reached out a strong hand to her. Ah, there was hope now that so toiling, and so helped, she might attain hereafter to that bright unknown, which, in her dim half-knowledge, she called fame.

And Barbara sung to herself like a little bird that was grateful for a gleam of sunshine. By and by a low whistle answered hers ; a voice called "Bab," and stopped ; then quick footsteps hurried after her, and two hands were laid on her shoulders, which turned and brought her face to face with Leigh.

"Leigh, is it you ? How you startled me !"

"You must be star-struck, then, Babchen ; here have I been whistling and calling to you, and you have only walked straight on, with your head up in the air, and singing the Old Hundredth, I believe."

Barbara laughed, and reached her hand up to his face, with

one of her wandering touches, and then a thought struck her: "Why, where have you been, Leigh? How hot you are! and your heart is beating, I can feel it, just as though you had been running hard, and on this hot night, too!"

"Nonsense," said Leigh impatiently. "Of course, I've been running all the length of the garden after you." His voice was light, as usual, but his face was flushed and his eyes shining with a restless eager look in them, very new to Barbara; she felt in a moment anxious, almost uneasy; she could not tell why.

"You have not been in the garden all the evening, Leigh?"

"Of course not; I have been taking a walk; it is such a lovely evening for a stroll. I should have asked you to come too, only you were talking to Strath."

"And you had your walk all alone," said Barbara, half questioning and half regretful.

"What makes you so curious this evening?" he returned. "What is it you suspect? Speak out plainly, and let's have a truce with all these questions."

Barbara almost jumped in her surprise. Leigh's tone was so unusually irritable. "Why, Gyp," she answered, in a grieved voice, "I did not mean to vex you; what should I suspect, dear?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he returned confusedly. "Don't mind my crossness; Rolf has put me out to-day. Give me a kiss, Bab. I don't deserve such a good little sister, do I?"

His quick repentance bewildered Barbara more than his irritability, all the more that she could see, in the uncertain light of the shrubbery path, that his face was working with some new emotion. Leigh was not himself to-night. She had noticed for some days that a sort of reserve seemed creeping up between them; and this barrier distressed, and at the same time frightened, her.

"Leigh," she said timidly, twisting her little finger into his button-hole, "you have not talked to me lately as you used to do; you never come up to my den of an evening now. Are you sure you are as fond of me?" she added, in a sort of frightened whisper; for Leigh did not like her to be too demonstrative, she knew, and she was rather dubious how he would take her question now, but she need not have been afraid, for he only drew her to him with a rough fondness.

"Why, Babchen, my dear Dame Muffet!" and he patted

her cheek, and tried to laugh it off, and stroked down her hair with his great hand, and did not grow impatient when she clung to him with many kisses. Only, by and by, when she wanted him to walk on with her, and listen to her history of the day, he pleaded fatigue, and went away from her, with some trifling excuse or other. Barbara did not feel in the mood to resume her lonely stroll, so she went and joined herself to two dark figures who were pacing the lawn before the house ; one of them was Norman ; but as he seemed talking seriously, she did not speak to him, but went and nestled herself under her father's arm, and was much taken up for some minutes in endeavouring to accommodate her hoppety step to their long strides, and, finding all her efforts fruitless, continued to make two steps to their one, which turned her walk into a *deux-temps* valse. So Barbara waltzed all by herself, and Norman talked on ; he was saying : " It seems a low lingering sort of fever, doctor, and the poor creatures, ill-fed as they are, easily succumb to it, it seems terribly infectious."

Dr. Heathcote shook his head. " There is not a single case in Sunningford, thank God."

" My dear sir, don't be thanking Providence too soon ; trust me it will spread here soon enough. There are two cases in the cottages round Dort's Mill, and I spoke to Paul Hillyard about not letting his women folk run in and out of the infected cottages. I thought it only right to give him warning, as I know Ruth Canham is much given to visiting the poor about there."

" Ah, that reminds me I had better speak to Hester," interposed the other hastily. " I can't have her putting herself into danger when she is so delicate."

" Yes, it is just as well to give her a hint," replied Norman ; " and Connie, she seems following in her sister's footsteps ; as for Barbara," here he gave a furtive glance to the little figure on the doctor's arm. " Well, the sick and the needy do not know Barbara among them." He spoke rather sadly, not satirically, and Bab hung her head under the well-merited reproof. Another time she would have resented its truth hotly, but not to-night.

" Well, well," returned her father soothingly, " it is not our Bab's vocation, I suppose. Don't be too hard on her, Norman. Well, you have brought bad news to-night from Durnford, but our course is clear, we will fight the fever, and try a few sanitary reforms in Sunningford ; only they will laugh at us to our faces.

"I would begin with Susan Moggs, if I were you, sir. Have that heap of refuse moved from her back premises, and try and get them to open some of their windows. Last time I paid them a visit I was half choked with the heat and the smoke; only one window that will open, I believe."

"Well, I will go my rounds to-morrow," replied the doctor, "and you will do the same at Durnford; but I won't promise myself or you much success. Susan Moggs is one of the most obstinate as well as the dirtiest woman in the village. I'll try and frighten her by telling her the fever will be sure to come to her first. And then there's old Purdock, he is even worse than she."

And then they talked about different cottages, and over the sanitary reforms they meant to carry out. Dr. Heathcote expressed his intention of applying to the Board of Health, and speaking to Sir Geoffrey Hunsden, who, as a landowner and lord of the manor, had a right to insist on improvements. "Only, Susan Moggs' cottage is a freehold," groaned the doctor. "I fear we have no right to make her windows open against her will."

"But the Board can insist on her moving her heap," replied Dr. Strath. "I wish she and her beggarly crew would go to the workhouse, for she is a perfect nuisance to the parish, always in some hot water or other."

And so they talked on. Barbara heard little scraps here and there, but not much. Norman's speech was rankling in her mind. All she took in of the conversation was that there was a low fever raging round Dort's Mill.

By and by Dr. Heathcote was summoned to the surgery, and Norman and she were left alone; and then Norman looked at his watch in the moonlight, and exclaimed at the lateness of the hour. "Far too late for you to be walking about on the grass bare-headed," he said in his quiet professional manner, as he put his hand lightly on her head. "Why, your hair is wet with dew. Run in, child, or we shall have you ill next."

"I am never ill," answered Barbara.

Dr. Strath smiled at her gravely. "Well, your turn may come some day, but I trust it may be long first. What—are you going away without saying good-night to me?"

"Good-night, Norman."

"Good-night, Barbara; what was it I called you this morning?"

"You said I was your little friend, did you not?" answered Bab with a new shyness.

"Ah, yes, my little friend—a good name, Barbara. There, good-bye, dear child; God bless you." He seemed about to say something more, but checked himself. His hands held hers firmly for a minute—such a strong warm clasp—and then he let her go, and Bab fled into the house with a strange pleasure beating at her heart which she did not understand in the least, but which she had never felt before in her life.

CHAPTER XVII.

BAB'S MASTER.

"No woman can be handsome by the force of features alone, any more than she can be witty only by the help of speech."—HUGHES.

"As for my wife,
I would you had her spirit in such matter;
The third of the world is yours; while with a snaffle
You may pace easy, but not such a wife."

SHAKESPEARE.

THE next morning Barbara was up with the lark, and she and Ben had paid a visit to the fir-woods long before breakfast, had wetted their feet with dew by skirting the green hollow which she always called now "Nest's Pulpit," and made their appearance at the family meal with appetites sharpened by exercise; for Ben always shared Bab's breakfast, sitting on his haunches gravely, with a bib tied round his neck, slobbering and licking his lips, and watching his mistress with watery eyes as she compounded savoury messes for him generally before she tasted food herself.

Breakfast was always a merry and often a prolonged meal at Heathcote; but this morning Barbara rather hurried her own repast and Ben's, and she was unusually silent, too, interchanged fewer jokes with the doctor, though she and he always had it their own way at breakfast, and were the life of the table—nay, she even put a stop to Leigh's flow of nonsense by Mr. Burchell's "fudge," uttered at intervals, and, much to Ben's disgust, left off eating the delicate crisp toast in which he always showed a peculiar interest, pushed back her chair, forgot her grace—no unusual thing with our little sinner—and, nodding radiantly

round the table, left Ben in his bib, an image of canine despair.

"What makes Barbara in such a hurry this morning?" said Hester, peeping round the urn at her father. But Dr. Heathcote only shook his head smilingly, and went on with his paper. Leigh, who was cutting the leaves of a periodical, whistled up Ben the disconsolate, and soothed him with choice modicums of crust. Ben, who had felt himself wounded in the tenderest part, began to wag his tail feebly, and with a sort of dim idea that petticoat government was becoming slightly tyrannical, turned radical on the spot.

"Let's go and find the missus," said Leigh presently, putting his hands in his pocket and striding lazily to the window; and so man and dog investigated lawn and shrubberies, and finally searched the den itself, but without success. "Why, where's Dame Muffet?" he asked, as he encountered Hester on the threshold of the Harlequin room; but Hester merely shrugged her shoulders with that cool indifference to Bab's whereabouts which always marked her manner in the early morning, and went jingling her keys in housewifely fashion.

"Who wants Dame Muffet?" cried out a cheery voice from the distance. Hester faced about in the utmost astonishment. There was Bab solemnly invested in a great bib apron stained with paint and reaching to her heels, her hair tucked back and combed from her ears after the fashion of a charity girl, her easel blocking up Hester's favourite window so as to command the best light, and Nigel's empty couch beside it.

Hester looked aghast, as well she might. "Barbara, I don't think you ought to litter up the drawing-room like this with that great ugly easel. Why, you are quite spoiling the best window in the room.

Barbara turned round with the utmost gravity. "Please don't jingle those keys so, Essie. Yes, I am going to take my first lesson with St. Ronans this morning. You need not make any difference for me, you know," she continued, in a tone of the utmost suavity. "I shan't mind your talking, and Sir Geoffrey can come in all the same, he won't disturb me a bit."

Hester could not believe her ears, such cool effrontery was beyond her comprehension. "But, Barbara, you don't understand me. The drawing-room is where Connie and I sit and work and receive visitors. You are so much in your den, you see, that you don't know our ways. You must take your lesson

elsewhere, I can't have the best room in the house messed over like that."

Barbara shouldered her palette and sparred with her paint brush at Ben, leaving a spot of yellow ochre on his nose "You don't like the piebald room messed over, Essie?"

"Well, no, I don't," returned Hester honestly. "Come, Barbara, you've got good sense, I see. Leigh will help you to carry away all that rubbish, and I will put the room straight in a moment."

"Carry up the easel carefully then, Leigh," said Bab cheerfully. "Ben, if you touch my portfolio I will paint you blue. Essie, you will explain to Daddy and Norman, please, what they will otherwise think rather queer, when they hear such a grand visitor as St. Ronans is obliged to go up to a place which is little better than a garret to give me lessons."

"No, that will never do," broke in Leigh. "Nigel Strath can't go and sit in that beggarly little room, Hester."

"There is the dining-room and the breakfast-room," said Hester decidedly.

"Yes, but in one room there are always meals about, and in the other Susan does her sewing. I don't think St. Ronans would care to sit with Susan, or to be harassed with the clatter of plates." Hester fairly hesitated and grew troubled, the delay and Barbara's sharp wits saved her, for she was inwardly resolved that in that room and no other would she take her lessons. "That will do, Leigh, please," said Barbara, smiling. "I don't want you for anything more; take Ben away with you, Hester does not like him in the drawing-room, and go up to St. Ronans' room and tell him I am quite ready," with a little emphasis on the "quite ready" that he understood in a moment. And as soon as Leigh had started on her errand she said, very sweetly: "It is too late to alter things this morning, Essie, and that will give you plenty of time to arrange what room is best for us in future."

Hester was puzzled and anxious, but Bab's unusual deference and ready compliance softened her, and so Bab had her way. Hester found the room more cheerful with St. Ronans and Barbara in it—it amused her to listen to their endless chatter; in a few mornings she ceased to grumble at the easel, found Barbara an ornamental stand for her brushes and paint-box, and betook herself cheerfully with Connie to another window where the garden view was not half so pretty. Nay, she even went further, for Ben, daring to follow Barbara in once or

twice, was suffered to remain so unmolested that he ceased to sneak under table-covers, and showed his great form openly stretched out on the softest rug, and blinked at Hester drowsily, quite as much at home as in the den.

The lessons proceeded rapidly. Nigel seemed to have found a new interest, he was so active and energetic. He soon proved himself a good master, and, to do her justice, Bab was a most ready and docile pupil. She was quick to take ideas, untiring in industry, and proof against his impatience; for though Nigel was very gentle with her the first two or three lessons, it was too much to expect him to change his nature all of a sudden. He soon got back to his irritable ways, spoke dictatorially, was brusque in his manner, and did not spare satirical speeches when she failed to please him.

But Barbara, who waxed hostile at Norman's least word, was lamb-like in her demeanour to her young master; her words were always conciliating, almost affectionate; she was not slow to apologise where apology was admissible, or if that were not feasible, to disarm his fretful reproaches by some soft little speech of her own. Hester used to wonder and comment on her exceeding patience—to her it was a new marvel, in her heart she thought Nigel often carping and fastidious, though she never said so.

But it was with Barbara as with many another woman, she felt a kind of tenderness to this man, whose weakness and delicacy moved her to compassion, who showed to her so continuously the faulty side of his character; she found him lovable and admirable in spite of his many defects, and though she felt instinctively that she was stronger than he, she did not care to assert her own superiority or measure wills, it would not have pleased her to do so, she humbled herself voluntarily to fulfil his behests; his harsh speeches did not hurt her, she learnt to understand them and himself too, and never suffered them to break for a moment her obstinate cheerfulness, and in all these things there was something great in Bab, seeing she did not love the man in spite of his beautiful face, but only had the quiet liking that a sense of mutual benefits and a community of tastes so pleasantly engendered. She grew to like him better and better as time went on; but these were early days of their acquaintance, when Nigel had his way, and Barbara grew humble and softened by happy work and such appreciation as she had never known, and so, day after day, grew the web that became so sorely tangled by and by.

The week became ten days, and then lengthened into a fortnight, but still Nigel nursed his wounded hand, kept on invalid airs, and maintained his position as guest and patient at the doctor's house. A favourite with every one, from the doctor downwards, as Bab said one day, they had never known their aim or duty in life till St. Ronans came, and found both consisted in waiting on him. It might have been so from the deference every one showed the young stranger; it was quite wonderful to see how he ruled this household, especially the women.

Nigel was never captious or contradictory with Hester. He talked to her and paid her little chivalrous attentions, as any man would to so beautiful a woman; he liked to have her near him—to feel her soft sisterly touches about his couch—her little fusses over him, her deft housewifely ways pleased him, as did the calm of her continual presence; he liked to lie and look at her, as though she were some picture or statue placed there for his delectation; he grew to acknowledge that she looked well in all lights and under all circumstances; that her stateliness and sweetness were equal, and that she reigned over her father's house like a queen.

And then she had other virtues. She could not talk, not as Bab could, for example; Hester was apt to grow a little prosy and slow in her conversation, she never advanced theories of her own, and rarely understood other people's; but she was an admirable listener. She had such tact, such sympathy, her face was not mobile, it was too statuesque for that; but her large grey eyes opened so widely and softly on the talker, she sat so still and smiled so sweetly, and then her few words were so full of rare appreciation, and all without effort—quiet, full of grace, as befits the true woman.

Lady Strath grew alarmed, as well she might, at her son's prolonged absence; she was loud in her reproaches during her daily visit, and not at all comforted by Nigel's oft-repeated excuses that he was studying English domestic life in its most primitive state. "Why, mother," he would say sometimes, "this visit may be the making of me, supposing I come home a steady respectable character, and leave all my unsettled views behind me; come now, would it not be worth while indulging me in my freak a week or two longer. I am not outstaying my welcome either, for no one wants to get rid of me."

"But I want you home again sadly, Nigel," returned Lady Strath, more frightened than she cared to own at her son's

speech ; "it is very dreary without you at St. Ronans. I don't want my boy to come back to me any different, you were always settled and steady enough for me." And the poor mother looked at Hester with jealous angry eyes as she spoke, making little doubt in her own mind that it was her fair face which kept Nigel such a willing prisoner at the doctor's house ; she scarcely spoke to her for two or three days after that, keeping her at a distance in the way some women can, much to Hester's chagrin and annoyance ; nor did she renew her old friendliness until one day she became accidentally acquainted with Sir Geoffrey Hunsden's pretensions, and then she almost overpowered her with her congratulations and caresses, making her understand that she regarded the doctor's penniless daughter, and a baronet's *fiancée*, as very different people. Barbara was present at this little scene, and almost suffocated herself with suppressed laughter. Her shrewdness had detected in a moment the secret of Lady Strath's dissatisfied face and excessive haughtiness, and she had taken the most elfish delight in hiding Sir Geoffrey's existence from her, adding fuel to her fears in every possible way, but at last Nest had betrayed them, and now Lady Strath was embracing Hester with lavish demonstrations of affection, and Hester's face was growing cloudy and red under the public infliction. "Indeed, dear Lady Strath, you are mistaken," she exclaimed, trying to release herself, but in vain.

"Mistaken, my dear Hester—you must let me call you so, for I am as fond of you as though you were my own daughter. Nay, I can hardly be wrong with Nest for my authority. Indeed, my dear girl, you must let me congratulate you on such an excellent match ; though, after all, it is only a position to which your beauty entitles you," and Lady Strath smoothed down the dark glossy hair, and whispered that it would grace a coronet—but Hester, who despised compliments, and knew besides that Nigel and Barbara were amused spectators of this scene, drew up her head haughtily, and spoke out, colouring hotly, but with proper feminine dignity :

"Whoever was your authority, Lady Strath, has told you wrong, your congratulations are premature, singularly so I must say ; there is only the slightest possible understanding between Sir Geoffrey and myself, nor shall I hold myself bound to him for another year—nor he to me, and not then if we do not mutually desire it." This last, spoken in a tone of the utmost coolness, as though she wished Lady Strath to understand that it was a matter of complete indifference to her—all the more

that she felt in her own heart that time was reconciling her to Geoffrey's slow wooing, that she was becoming more blind to his faults of character, and less alive to his many personal defects; nay, more, she began to feel that though she could never love him, who had once loved Arthur Mayhew, still she could do her duty happily by him, and life could pass peaceably with them two, seeing that the man was honourable in his generation, and she could do reverence to the strong integrity that was the basis of his character.

Lady Strath was very much discomfited by Hester's proud reply; it came into her head that she might be keeping her suitor back in the hope of winning Nigel. The young master of St. Ronans would be almost as good a match as the other, and infinitely preferable if one took into consideration his great personal attractions. Yes, it must be this; Hester must be playing one against the other; her boy had fallen into a trap through his own wilfulness, and he who might have mated with one of the highest county families would be inveigled into marrying a country doctor's daughter, just because she had a fair face and carried her head proudly. And Lady Strath during many a sleepless night cursed the day he ever set foot in Heathcote House, and wearied herself to death by devising one scheme after another for breaking the spell that seemed to be upon him—schemes that fell to the ground worse than fruitlessly, seeing that he opposed them by the mere force of will. Nigel was not blind to his mother's fears on his own account, but he never tried to combat them, though he laughed long and secretly; he thought time would prove her error to her better than he.

He grew a little proud over it too. "Does my mother think that Hester Heathcote is the only beautiful woman I have ever seen?" he said to himself; "does she imagine that I who have travelled half over Europe and seen every form and variety of female loveliness, should come home fancy free—to be madly infatuated with a doctor's daughter, just because she has fine eyes and a good figure? A woman, too, whose ideas are narrowed to her own petty circuit of village life! Pshaw!" And Nigel lay and pondered what faces he had seen that might dim and cast Hester's in the shade, and never rested till he had counted over a score; and then he scoffed afresh at his mother's fantastic folly.

Nigel Strath was singularly fastidious, but he was also impressionable. Twenty-five may pretend to philosophy, but it cannot fail of the susceptibility of youth. Nigel was only a

very young man, with a warm sensuous temperament, after the true artist model; he had not escaped heart-free during his continental sojourn, in spite of his weak health and stoical pretences—far from it; his flirtations had been numerous, and he had been engaged twice; once to a young German baroness, whose fair-haired beauty had enthralled him, he thought no one on earth could be compared to his gentle Gretchen; but he saw her eat once—his English fastidiousness was shocked, and her beauty paled sadly from that day. They quarrelled—at least he did, and Gretchen cried her blue eyes dim, and then went and married a red-faced Graf, old enough to be her father, and became the prettiest little Graffenin in the world, and when Nigel met her again they were excellent friends.

And then there was Maria, the young Florentine whom he had met at the French Embassy, and whom he followed with the ardour and romance of an Italian, and the dogged perseverance of an Englishman. The world had never held so beautiful a creature, he swore, and they were engaged; for Nigel could make himself fascinating when he chose, and Maria really loved her pale-faced lover, but happening to overhear a little fracas, a mere dispute—nothing in the world but a scolding from Maria to her maid—Nigel's love waxed cold and fell away. Heaven forbid, he said, that he should bring this beautiful virago into his English home; though her angel's face should drive him mad he would not do it—and so they parted; and Lady Strath, who grew alarmed lest Nigel should learn to rue her wrath in this land of stilettos, never desisted from her entreaties till he consented to set sail for England; and with the remembrance of Maria's dark eyes still glowing freshly in his mind, no wonder he held lightly his mother's estimation of Hester's influence; for, though he promised himself an English wife before many years were over, that wife should not be Hester Heathcote: so he told himself Sir Geoffrey Hunsden was welcome to her; and he laughed a low laugh of amused content. He found something else to laugh at before many days were over; for Connie, feeling terribly neglected and dull, shook her yellow curls over her eyes, and deliberately set her cap at the young stranger.

It was terribly dull at home, without any one to flirt with or to praise her pretty face; Connie had a little secret of her own, a grave tremendous secret, which she guarded with the jealousy of sweet seventeen. The Vicar had an orphaned nephew, whom he had adopted and educated as his own son;

and so it fell that Sydney Herbert and Connie were thrown much together, and in their old childish days Sydney had been Connie's little sweetheart.

But Sydney had grown a tall strong fellow now, with a fair beardless face, and a habit of blushing that was very painful to him; and Hester, who had guessed at their secret—though Connie had kept it even from her—was not at all sorry that Mr. Herbert had sent him to join a reading-party at the Lakes, instead of dawdling away his long vacation in the Heathcote garden; it would separate them, and prevent things going too far. Sydney would have time to know his own mind, and Connie's foolish heart would be in her own keeping a little longer. So Hester reasoned in her wise way, most careful for her child's happiness; she and her father had a long talk about it one day, and the doctor pished and pooh-pooh'd a good deal in his droll manner, at the idea of their Connie being a grown-up woman. "Impossible;" "nay, not impossible," Hester assured him very gently, though with tears in her eyes; by and by, in a few years' time, if they both know their own minds, and were faithful to their childish loves, it would be an excellent thing for Connie—for Sydney was a clever young fellow, and would practise as barrister, and Mr. Herbert would leave him quite a nice little property when he died, though their Connie must live in London, she feared.

"Softly, softly, my dear," answered her father; "Mr. Herbert will live twenty years yet, and Sydney—confound the fellow—why does he want my Connie?—may be a briefless barrister, dragging on long weary terms of years before he gets his start. Keep them apart, Hester; let them see as little of each other as possible; time enough when he gets his degree and sets up his chambers—and even then I hate long engagements." So Hester kept them apart, and was not at all sorry when Sydney paid his sad lingering adieus, and went off to the Cumberland lakes; nor would she pity Connie, when she went languidly up and down the garden paths, and left off practising and reading, and forgot to tend her roses; nay, she even grew hard-hearted, scolded her severely for a fit of hysterics she had one hot day, and threatened a course of cod-liver oil if she saw her look so thin and drooping—a summary proceeding which had the effect of bracing up love-sick Connie, though she still slept with a locket round her neck, and wept copious tears over a discoloured piece of blue ribbon she had taken off his straw hat; but she moped less about the house, ate more, and, by and

by, when Nigel took up his quarters among them, broke out into her old smiles ; and, on the maxim, "out of sight, out of mind," forgot Sydney's blushing attentions, and shook her yellow curls in Nigel's face.

If a kitten had sat up and purred softly at him Nigel would not have been less moved, he did not harden his man's heart against the little girl, her pretty rosy face forbade that, but he put a stop to her sentimentality and gushing little ways in the oddest and brusquest manner, he patted her on the head as it were—laughed at her airs and graces and quizzed her smart braveries, and further humiliated her by refusing to accept a single service at her hands ; and all in a good-natured brotherly way that had the effect of restoring Connie to her senses again. But such is the nature of women, seventeen in particular, that must and will love something ; Connie began looking at her blue ribbon over again—and the one or two merry letters that Sydney wrote to her were rendered illegible by much reading and were reduced to fragments and mere figments of penmanship.

Barbara's oddities became quite refreshing after Connie's milk-and-water sentimentalities. Barbara's greatest enemy could not accuse her of airs and graces, she was like a whiff of healthy moorland breeze on an autumn day, a little keen and whistling, perhaps, rather roughening to smooth skins, administering wholesome friction as it were, but full of sweetness notwithstanding.

The little brown girl, whose homely dress and ways Lady Strath so despised, was growing Nigel's fast friend, most likely on the principle that extremes meet ; for what charm could the quaint little figure in her paint-stained apron and wavy brown hair tucked back behind her ears, find in the eyes of this critical young artist, always neat and faultless in his attire, and strong in antipathy to what he called "left-handed women." He had the impertinence to tell Barbara once, when he was vexed at her appearance before his mother, that when she had done her hair last her fingers must have been all thumbs, and then he told her about the bird in the furze bush ; Barbara walked up straight to her room, and by dint of much brushing, water, and cosmétique, reduced her hair to a dull satin-looking plaster, unwholesomely dark and moist, knotted it up in a comb, neat, without a stray hair, and so spent the evening before Nigel's and his mother's eyes, the veriest little fright that was ever seen. Even Dr. Heathcote was ashamed of his brown puss, as he sometimes called her, though why was not perceivable, seeing that her skin in reality was as fair as Hester's. As for Nigel,

used to stroll up to Heathcote House once or twice a week, with his pointer at his heels, in shamefaced obedience to Lady Hunsden's suggestions.

"She will slip away altogether before the year is out, Geoff," his mother would say, at breakfast time; and Geoff, perhaps, who had promised himself a day's hunting or shooting, or trout angling, as the case might be, would eye his gun or fishing-tackle disconsolately, thrust his great hands deeper down into the pockets of his shooting-coat, whistle gravely to his old favourite "Nell," and saunter down the Brackley roads with the air of a man who has made up his mind to a disagreeable business which he must carry through without the faintest notion how it was to be done. The length and heaviness of his wooing oppressed Geoffrey dreadfully, he began to rebel at the long ordeal Hester had placed before him. "If a man's got to be executed, what's the use of being such a long time about it?" he would growl to himself occasionally, or sometimes when the day was fine and he felt unusually restive, "There's handsomer women than even Hester Heathcote in the world who would jump at what I've got to offer her—perhaps after all this waiting," and here I am obliged to confess that Geoffrey used a strong expression—"perhaps, after all this, she will throw me over." And with these pleasant thoughts uppermost he used to make his appearance in the Harlequin drawing-room with the heavy cheerfulness of an over-driven ox, who feels himself put upon and does not like to say so.

But Hester never seemed to notice these cold fits of Geoffrey's. She had got used to his stammering advances and his poor attempts at conversation; sometimes, indeed, when he got on the hunting-field and related for the twentieth time some marvellous trait of sagacity in Nell, or some worn-out joke of Lady H.'s, Hester would gently remark, "I have heard that before, Geoffrey," or "Please, don't tell me what those rough hunting squires say;" reproofs that, however delicately conveyed, always put him to dire confusion and invariably silenced him; and Hester would have it all her own way. And then how she bored him. Nigel was forced to confess that she was very injudicious in her treatment of him; for his own part he thought Geoffrey was the one to be pitied. "Our luckless wooer has been here again," he would say to his mother. "Gracious! what a pair to run together in the traces! What do you say, Barbara? Don't you think that speech worthy of the Hunsden? Oh dear! oh dear! I shall

explode some day when they are together, I know I shall!" And Nigel threw himself back on his couch and laughed till the tears ran down his face. Barbara looked on, her face dimpling with amusement, but with her matter-of-fact manner quite undisturbed. "I am too used to it to laugh, St. Ronans," she would say in her droll manner, "and, after all, it is no laughing matter."

"Don't believe her, mother—it was the finest joke in the world. The Hunsden was sitting in that chair there looking the picture of florid discontent; while Hester was, as usual, on her parochial hobby-horse, and did she not ride him to death? She is a handsome woman and a very pleasant companion, if you know how to manage her." Here Nigel drew up his head with a conscious air; "but she is a tremendous bore to him."

"Indeed," said Lady Strath, rather stiffly. "I think she is a very good sort of young woman, Nigel, and pretty too, if you admire such a pale face."

"Fie, fie, my lady, and this from you, who avowed so lately that stately head deserved a coronet." Nigel opened his eyes rather widely and made a signal that they were not alone; but Lady Strath cared nothing at all for Barbara. "Well, I've said nothing I am ashamed to repeat," she said, when Barbara left them. "There must be different opinions even on the subject of Miss Heathcote's beauty."

"Take care, mother, or my Brownie will be flying at you. No, there can be but one opinion—that Hester Heathcote is very attractive; well, what was I saying? Oh! she was on the subject of workhouses and one Molly Holt, whom she declares was incarcerated in one, and deprived of two aged luxuries, to wit, tea and snuff. I could not quite understand whether she wished to see her *fiancé* in future dispensing these unwholesome articles, but Sir Geoffrey seemed to think she had some such idea, for he fumbled in his pockets in a helpless kind of way, till she came to his relief, pounced upon the coin she wanted, and pocketed it before his eyes; he evidently thought now that he had bought himself off, and began straightening himself in a cheerful sort of way; but not a bit of it, she was down on him again in a fresh place, about some tumble-down cottages or other, and then she was called away, and Nest came in."

But the visit that Nigel so caricatured was certainly the pleasantest that Sir Geoffrey had ever known, despite its

ominous beginning, for just as Hester rose, with a "I'll tell you all about it when I come back, Geoffrey," and he had stumbled across the drawing-room, in his thick boots, to open the door for her, and stumbled back again, Nest came in like a flash of sunshine through the window, and all the heaviness was gone. Sir Geoffrey had seen Nest at church, and had been introduced to her at the Vicarage, but he was not at all prepared for her taking gentle possession of him and making him so thoroughly at home. "Go and talk to Sir Geoffrey," Barbara had whispered, "St. Ronans and I are busy, and he is such a bore." So Nest came towards him timidly, with the soft dignity that never deserted her, and seated herself before this rough Newfoundland of a man, with the sincere desire to do her duty by him.

She began by praising Nell, whom she had met prowling round Connie, and the flower-beds, "such a dear dog, such an intelligent face," she said.

Sir Geoffrey's handsome but heavy countenance cleared in a moment, his tongue seemed loosened by magic. "'Pon honour," he began, "she is the finest dog I have ever seen in my life—she has a history, that animal has, Miss Strath," and then it all came out, the anecdote Hester had heard over and over, only enlarged and commented on, as he saw Nest's genuine interest; and then he went on—the man had got a start, no gentle propriety was there to check him, "who says I can't talk," he thought once, as he stroked his fair moustache, and five minutes after that he was on the forbidden hunting-fields—he and Nest were leaping five-barred gates together, struggling through hedges, and in at the death too; and then she was introduced to his favourite hunters, made acquainted with their several peculiarities and beauties, and not a little mystified at the terms in which they were expressed. She thought his conversation manly, and asked Barbara afterwards if he were not clever, he knows so much about horses and dogs. "Some one told me he never talked; why, I could hardly stop him once when I wanted to ask a question." Nor was Nest exaggerating, the man waxed quite eloquent on those subjects in which he felt himself at home. Nest's artless interest warmed him and drew him out—both were quite sorry when Hester returned, but Sir Geoffrey, who had not seemed in the least hurry the minute before, now broke off in the middle of a description of Artemis, who won last year's Derby, and grasped his hat in hot haste.

"Why, you surely are not going, Geoffrey!" exclaimed Hester, in a disappointed tone; "I was just going to sit down comfortably and tell you all the rights of the case about those cottages."

"I will come again and hear it; I can't wait now," gasped Geoffrey, pulling on his gloves by main force. "I've promised Lady H. a drive in the mail phaeton; can't put off the old lady; sorry all the same, Hester."

"Whom do you call Lady H.?" asked Nest, curiously looking up in his face.

"Oh! Lady H. is the Mater. Eh! what's the matter, Hester?"

"So often as I have begged you not to call her by that name," said Hester in an aggrieved voice. "It is not right, Geoffrey; it is not reverent. When she gets older, it will sound badly from you."

"Eh, what!" he repeated, looking at her with surprise. To tell the truth, Hester seemed rather put out, a little cross—though why she could not have told. "Irreverent: not a bit of it; I've always called the Mater Lady H. ever since we've been left together. It is a little joke between us. Lady H.—why, what should I call her?"

"It is not for me to tell you," returned Hester meaningly, but very much provoked.

And Nest crept up to him in her noiseless way, and said gently: "Call her mother, Sir Geoffrey; she will like that best of all."

Sir Geoffrey looked down on the sweet face raised to his; something seemed to rise in his throat as he looked; he coughed it down. "Mother," he muttered, half to himself, "mother;" and then his face brightened all over: "eh, well, yes, that's true—Lady H. will be sure to like that."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BE FAITHFUL, BARBARA.

"Beshrew me, but I love her heartily ;
For she is wise, if I can judge of her ;
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true ;
And true she is, as she hath proved herself ;
And therefore like herself, wise, fair, and true,
She shall be placed in my constant soul."

SHAKSPEARE.

So time went on merrily at Heathcote House, and presently Nigel Strath took his departure.

And he left them as suddenly as he had arrived. One morning he came down a little earlier than was his wont, and quietly announced his intention of returning to St. Ronans that same day. "I find my mother wants me," was all the excuse he volunteered ; and then he went on with his breakfast.

And if Susan had dished up a thunderbolt, the little party could hardly have been more surprised. The doctor opened his eyes wide, Hester made a little speech, and Connie was loud in her lamentations ; only Barbara was silent.

"We shall miss you dreadfully," Hester was saying. Nigel bowed, and Barbara drank her coffee with an effort.

"I suppose you will be going to the village by and by, doctor?"

"In about half an hour—perhaps less," said Dr. Heathcote, looking at his watch.

"In half an hour ; then I think I will walk with you, and Stevens can follow with my traps. If there be anything that I hate," continued the young philosopher, "it is a fuss of leave-taking, or a fuss of welcome. My mother, though superior to her sex in most things, is not exempt from this little failing. The house would not contain the length and breadth of her preparations. I am not quite sure that she would not consider it her duty to roast an ox whole, as a sort of thank-offering for my special deliverance and safe return. Mothers are only human, doctor, so I told her nothing about it."

"But how about the little sister? She will come in presently, and find you gone."

"Oh, Nest! she's nobody: besides, she is in the secret. Nest's fuss is of the quiet sort, and not quite unbearable."

Dr. Heathcote shrugged his shoulders. He thought this the strangest young man he had ever seen; but it was not for him to say anything; so he changed the subject skilfully, and Nigel responding with an air of relief, they were by and by fencing in their old way on political subjects, on which the doctor always proved to himself, and everybody else, that he was in the right, while Nigel, just for argument's sake, and breathless as one who scents the battle, invariably defended a false position step by step, covering himself with a shield of words, and provoking his enemy to advance, till, just in the hottest of the skirmish, he would throw up the whole with a careless "That will do, doctor; I was quite of your opinion from the first," and then begin some laughing argument with Barbara, leaving his opponent exhausted with needless argument, and thoroughly discomfited with his mock victory.

They were having a real skirmish this morning, for Nigel was in no jesting mood; Leigh was on his father's side, and there was quite a war of words. Another time Barbara would have rushed in between them, and made the confusion worse by rallying the weakest party; but though they were belabouring and cudgelling her favourite statesman between them, and knocking down her pet opinions like ninepins, nothing could disturb her gravity or provoke her to open her lips: she only sat plaiting the table-cloth into fretful little folds that matched exactly the frowning lines on her forehead. Was Barbara cross? Not that that was anything new; but she was fuming now with a positive chafe and pain: it was not too much to say that she was hurt and disappointed beyond endurance. St. Ronans was a failure, then. All men were failures, she thought, as she pushed back her chair and walked to the window, which piece of independent action broke up the party.

"Time's up!" said Dr. Heathcote. "I shall be ready in ten minutes."

"All right, doctor," answered Nigel lazily; and then he put his hands in his pockets, after Leigh's fashion, and lounged up to Barbara's window.

But Bab never looked at him: she only gave a toss to the tassel of the blind, and seemed intent on catching it again. Nigel stood quietly by, and watched her. The childishness of the proceeding seemed to amuse him. Then he waxed im-

patient, and jerked it out of her reach, with a slight laugh ; but Bab took no notice : she only drummed idly on the window-sill, and hummed an air, with the sulkiest face imaginable. Nigel leaned towards her with a frank smile. "Well, there must be an end to everything, I suppose. So good-bye, Barbara."

"Good-bye," said Barbara coldly ; but she never left off drumming.

A queer inexplicable look came over Nigel's face, and then he took back his hand without a word.

"Good-bye," said Barbara, this time with manifest effort ; "Daddy will be waiting for you." And then she took up her humming again without the slightest hesitation. There was no mistaking her mood ; but if she could only have seen the scrutiny that read the meaning of every movement ! But Bab never looked at any one when she was displeased : it would have brought her too soon to reason.

"What makes you in such a bad humour this morning ?" thus quietly asked Bab's master.

The suddenness of the question made her crimson in a moment ; but it unscaled her lips. "I am not in a bad humour," she answered ; "but I am disappointed in you," and then her eyes filled with tears. Barbara, as usual, spoke the truth from her heart. It was very childish and very undignified of her, without doubt ; but who ever did couple Bab and dignity together ? And there was genuine pathos in her voice, and genuine tears in her eyes. She was hurt ; there was no denying that. The suddenness of the leave-taking, the quick break-up of pleasant lessons, distressed her beyond measure. She thought him ungrateful ; and ingratitude was a great sin in Bab's eyes. "Good-bye," she said again. "You have only disappointed me—that is all ; but all men are alike."

"And all women, too. What faithless creatures you are !—you especially, Barbara." There was no mistaking the kindness of his tone now. Bab looked up quickly, and his smile was pleasant to her.

"I do not understand," she faltered ; "it seems all so strange, and sudden, and unkind."

"You do not understand ?" he continued, a little loftily ; "but then you are only a woman, and you do not know the manner of man you are dealing with. I shall not disappoint you, Barbara ; neither am I ungrateful or unkind, nor any of the hard things you have been thinking me the last half-hour.

Call me nothing, please, till I give you leave : at present I am only Bab's master."

His speech bewildered her—she felt it enigmatical ; but then there was no doubting his kindness. She hung her head, already abashed at her petulance.

"I can't give you your lesson to-day," he said quietly ; "you can work up by yourself, or not, as you please. To-morrow I shall be ready for you as usual."

Barbara gave him an astonished look.

"To-morrow ; but where?"

"In my studio, of course," he replied, with an amused look at her surprise. "Don't be alarmed," he continued, mischievously ; "Nest will be there to play propriety. I have arranged it all with my mother, and the doctor approves ;" and this prudential speech to Bab, who cared nothing for proprieties and decorum as the world understands them. "There's the doctor calling me. Adieu ! au revoir, Barbarina mia. I am sorry you are disappointed in me." Such a wicked little smile on his face as he spoke. Barbara met it with a shamefaced happy look, but without a word.

But as soon as he had left the room she clapped her hands, and broke into a sweet little trill like a bird, and then ran out into the garden and picked a white moss-rose bud off her favourite tree ; and when Nigel came out with her father, after laughing adieus with Hester and Connie, she came up shyly and pushed it into his hand, as she had done once before ; but she was not prepared for the bright full smile that understood and thanked her ; so in her confusion she shook her hair over her eyes, and went and hid behind some lilac bushes, and would not answer his gaily uttered good-bye, nor take any notice of her father's cheery call ; only when they were gone, she stole out, and peeped through the gate till they were fairly out of sight, and till Connie's call summoned her to fresh surprises and fresh repentances.

She had reproached Nigel for his ingratitude and caprice, and he had left such tangible proofs of his sojourn amongst them as a young prince might have done, and strewn in the same careless profusion : in every room lay some gift that might make glad the owner's heart—choice books for Dr. Heathcote, a costly cameo for Hester, a set of mosaic ornaments for Connie, and a picture in Barbara's den, with the line, "In appreciation of her honest industry, from Bab's master."

Nest, coming in an hour later, found her gloating over her

treasure with crimson cheeks and wide-opened eyes. Few were the gifts that came to Barbara's share, and rare in consequence was the pleasure she experienced in them. This was perhaps the first work of art that had ever reached her; and then so exquisitely framed too! and she touched the delicate oaken carving, fine with artistic touches, marvelling over its beauty. Nest put her hands softly on her shoulders, and leaned her cheek against hers: "Do you like it, dear?"

"'Liking' is no word," answered Barbara, with a sort of forced composure in her voice. "If he really did this, he is worthy indeed of being my master;" and Barbara gave a little sigh, half sad, and wholly envious.

"Yes, Nie did this. Is it not beautiful—the idea, I mean? It came to him one day when he was listening to some nuns singing behind the lattice. He never knew why, or what occasioned it; but the whole scene, horrid with darkness as it is, flashed over him. Without exception, it is his best picture."

"Then why did he give it me?" inquired Barbara, with a flush of surprise.

"You had better ask him. Ah, Nie is always generous. He was asking me what I thought you would like best, and I said a picture, especially if it were one of his own; and then he mentioned this Magdalene. I could not help calling out, 'Nie, that is your best; don't give that;' and he answered rather sharply, 'And why not? I shall do as I like,' and ordered it to be put in the Tyrolean frame directly. I was a little surprised, I must own, as I knew how highly he prized the picture and carved frame, but I soon grew ashamed of the feeling; for of course he knows, far better even than we do, that you saved his life."

"Nonsense," said Barbara, rather flurried. She could not tell whether it was pain or pleasure beating at her heart, or a strange mingling of both; and she had told him that she was disappointed in him, and had treated him rudely. Well, she could not understand him at all; and then she applied herself anew to her picture.

It was a singular and striking subject, and was entitled, "The night of the first Good Friday." Picture and subject were alike wrapped in gloom.

In detail, it was the summit of the Mount of Sorrow, after the "World's Wonder" had been taken down and laid in the sepulchre: there, rudely flung aside, was the rough-hewn cross,

blood-stained, painfully suggestive ; and half lying, half kneeling, her arms cast about it, her lips pressed to the stained wood, the Magdalene, her beauty dimly shadowed forth in the gloom ; yet one could trace swelling tears under the reddened eyelids—eyes strained with horror and heavy with woe.

“Come, Barbara, I must be going ; he told me to hasten back.” Barbara rose, and reverently shrouded the picture with misty eyes.

“Tell him nothing—only for yourself, listen ! What sermons fail to teach me, that picture has taught. I can see it all ;” and she shuddered. “There, kiss me, Nest ; I want to be alone, and study it a little more.”

And she studied it till her eyes were wet with tears, so greatly did it move her ; but when she had put it away, and had had a long run in the pine-woods, and a long talk with herself and Ben, a sort of warm summer happiness, as sunny as the day itself, came over her—a feeling of satisfaction and content that she rarely felt.

“I feel very happy,” she said, quite out loud to herself, as she sat down in her den. “What shall I do ? I think, as I feel so very, very full of cheerfulness, I had better go down to Oakleigh Cottage and talk to Mrs. Strath ; and as first impulses are always the best, I will, I will, I will.” And so she dressed herself, singing as the birds do for very glee.

There is one thing that is better than a first impulse, and that is a first duty. As Barbara came down in her white summer dress, with its bright-coloured ribbons, and nodded a cheery good-bye to her sister, who sat alone in her old place, it never occurred to her that Hester looked pale and a little dull, and that it was rather more weary for her than usual to sit and work alone, after the constant brightness of Nigel’s presence ; neither did it enter her head that it might have been kinder to stay at home and impart a little of her superabundant cheerfulness to Hester, than to carry its freshness elsewhere. Alas, alas ! Bab was only a faulty little person, abounding, as too many do, in small everyday selfishnesses, looking out too far and wide for some great work to do, and so missing that small daily gathering of those humbler flowers that an old saint has told us grow at the foot of the cross.

Hester’s gravity and paleness were things of too common occurrence for Barbara to notice. She had a dim notion that her sister’s spirits were often flagging ; but that she should stay at home, and impart to her some of her own bright vitality, and

so doom herself to a corresponding dulness, was a stretch of benevolence that certainly never came into her mind ; and so it was, that Bab missed her place at home, and some portion of its love also ; for, save for Leigh, her sweetest smiles were for her own elected friends, and so, by that divinely just law, the measure meted out was in her case meted to her again. Hester looked after her with wistful eyes. She thought how bright and happy she looked. What a fresh lovesome face it was when she was in a good humour ; and then she wished Connie were not out, for the house lay simmering in a great silence, only broken by clanging doors ; heat, sunshine, and emptiness ; and she sat with a bitter heartache, remembering how, this day so many years ago, the man whose memory she worshipped had first come to her, and now the hot winds and the burning sun beat down on his neglected headstone, and she sat alone in her father's home an altered and careworn woman. Ah, so altered ! and here lay the sum of her regret, so hardened and proud and weary with the years. Ah, could he see her now, would her dead Arthur love her as he did in her fresh sweet youth ? and so, with her tired head and tired heart, she wore out the summer afternoon.

Meanwhile Barbara stayed her dancing feet, and wondered what sort of a reception she would get. "Why, it is a whole fortnight since Nest and I spent the evening there, and I have only seen Mrs. Strath since at church." And then she thought of Norman, and hereupon she became grave. Norman had not seemed himself lately, or she had fancied it ; she did not know which. He had only dropped in two or three times since his cousin had been with them, and each visit he had seemed pre-occupied, absent, or out of spirits. He had not had a word for Barbara since that moonlight evening when he had spoken to her so kindly. He hardly noticed her ; and when he did, his old brusque manner had returned. Barbara had a dim notion that something had offended him ; and as this idea returned upon her now with full force, she walked up the trim garden as demurely as a scolded kitten might have done ; and so noiseless was her entry, that she stood within the room before Mrs. Strath was aware of her vicinity.

"So you are come at last ?" said Mrs. Strath, quietly laying down her work. Her tone was a little cold ; but she eyed Barbara tenderly for all that, and there were warm sparkles of welcome in her eyes.

"Yes, I have come at last ;" and just as the aforesaid scolded

kitten rubs and fondles and purrs away judicial wrath, and licks its wicked little lips the while, so did Bab make a little flurry of demonstration and repentance, soft appealings against anger, warm protests for the future, and dimpling excuses which never got to words. And so it came to pass that she was presently installed on her favourite stool, in her favourite place ; and Mrs. Strath's hands were idle, and her face benign ; and Bab's words waxed faster and faster, like the chatter of a purling little brook that brims over for very fulness, stammering and chafing in its eagerness against opposing obstacles, and determined to the very last to have its say. Thus the hours, that passed so slowly to Hester, slid away so rapidly to these two, that both started with surprise when Jeannie entered with the clatter of tea-things, and Mrs. Strath, exclaiming at the lateness, bustled about, Bab, as usual, watching her.

"There, everything is ready ; may I call Norman ?"

"Yes. No, I think you had better not, my dear," returned her friend nervously.

"But why not ? He came in long ago, and shut himself up in the pipe-room. The tea will be spoilt if we leave it any longer."

"Yes, I know ; but I think I will send Jeannie in with it ; or you may take it, Barbara. Norman is very busy, and will not come in this evening."

"Not come in ! not come to his tea !" Barbara stood aghast, and then her obstinacy asserted itself. "Oh, nonsense ! busy or not, he must come in. He does not know I am here, does he ?"

Mrs. Strath evaded the question. "Well, go and see for yourself, my dear : I can do nothing with him. He has told me he wants to finish an article for the *Lancet* to-night, and that I am to send him a cup of tea. He has one of his old headaches, and it is as hot as it can be in that stuffy little room ;" and Mrs. Strath, for once in her life, looked rather put out.

"Well, the world's coming to an end," thought Barbara, "if Mrs. Strath is cross. I'll do what I can," she said aloud, and gave herself a vigorous shake as she went out of the room.

She stood still a moment in the dark square little hall to collect her forces, as she told herself. There was still something of the scolded kitten about her now, and she lingered not unwillingly on the threshold of the bright kitchen, with its shining firelight and gleaming tins, with Jeannie's neat figure moving about in the little stone yard outside, amidst glints of sunlight and shadows of waving trees.

There were two other rooms on the ground-floor, beside the kitchen and the pleasant parlour where Mrs. Strath sat—a little three-cornered room, shabbily, almost barely, furnished, where they took their meals, and another still more oddly-shaped room where Norman kept his books, and instruments, and other odds and ends of miscellaneous rubbish.

Barbara, in her quaint fashion, had nicknamed this room the pipe-room, which, strange to say, its shape oddly resembled. As Barbara entered it, it seemed just like a tiny passage leading to nowhere, lined on either side by book-shelves, but at the farther angle widening out on one side into roomier space, with a window and a fireplace and more book-shelves, and just large enough to hold a study-table and two or three chairs ; and as it did, in some measure, resemble the bowl of a pipe in its form, it fully justified Barbara's ridiculous appellation of "the old brown pipe-room." Old and brown it might be ; but it looked cosy enough this afternoon, with its open window almost framed with Virginia creeper, and looking out on a bed of scarlet geranium and sweet perfumy mignonette. And Norman did not look uncomfortable as he sat in his corner, though his chair would jerk back on the book-shelves ; and he looked as though he would touch the ceiling when he stood up.

Barbara peeped round, and took it all in before she made good her entry ; and then she drew near on tiptoe, and stood silently beside him, waiting till his noisy quill scratched itself dry.

There, it was empty now ; but no—he dipped it afresh into the battered inkstand, and it was scratching and squeaking over the paper again, spluttering out its inky trail ;—how Barbara hated quills ! and Norman, with his grave face, worked on, squaring his great shoulders and wrinkling his forehead till his eyebrows were lost in his hair, while Barbara played a noiseless tune on his chair-back ; and all the time she knew that he knew she was there.

Splash went the quill into the ink again. She must speak, so she cleared her throat and said, "Hem !" and then coughed and fidgeted : the hideous scratching went on faster. "Norman," she began, and then stopped to wonder what new timidity made her voice so hoarse. Was it her fear that he was offended ? "Norman," she repeated, growing bolder, "the tea is ready, and your mother is waiting. We did not like to begin without you : please, come." Dr. Strath tilted his chair backward, and poised his pen in mid-air. "Is that you, Barbara ? Why are

you standing behind me ? I have just asked my mother to send me in a cup of tea here."

"But, Norman, do come in and have it with us : it is so cool and pleasant in the other room ; and we have set the table close to the open window. Your mother does look so disappointed, and so am I." The last very softly said, she was beginning to find her task difficult ; but difficulties arouse some natures to greater persistence. It was a very little thing, but Bab had set her heart on having her own way, and so she put in the last clause very softly uttered. Dr. Strath gave her one of his queer looks, and smiled grimly. "The disappointment won't be hard to bear, Barbara : please let me finish my work in peace." And then he went on writing. To leave him in peace with her mission unfulfilled was the last thing Barbara intended to do, so she only went a little closer and secretly shook the table. Dr. Strath looked up and smiled, as Nigel did, at her childishness. That smile gave Barbara courage. She leant over him now, and put her little hand coaxingly on his. "Oh do come, Norman, please. I have not been here for such a long time, and your mother really wants you ; do come." Barbara had no idea how irresistible she could be when she tried. Plain women, or rather those who think themselves plain, never know their own power. Bab had no conception of the sweetness of her voice at this minute, or the pathetic childishness of her whole face and manner. Dr. Strath growled a little like a sulky bear, but he could not resist her ; so he rose and followed her, and Barbara tried hard not to look too pleased at her triumph. The world was changing for Bab when she first began to taste the sweets of power ; that womanly power that can sway the will of a strong man. Mrs. Strath looked much surprised and greatly pleased when they entered the room. Her brow cleared as by magic ; and then she placed a chair for her son, and began to make a loving little fuss over him, as such women will, especially mothers ; and she kissed Barbara, and said a great many kind things to her ; and Barbara began to feel very happy indeed, while Dr. Strath, in spite of his headache and his unfinished work, found the pretty tea-table a welcome change from his hot study ; and Barbara, with her white dress and a crimson rose placed coquettishly in her brown hair, with her round dimpled face and ringing laugh, was so sweet a picture of youth and brightness and innocence, that it was not in man's nature not to feel genial and refreshed by such pleasant surroundings : therefore, though he was silent,

and said very little to any one at first, his manner thawed visibly, and by and by he took to watching Barbara, and said to her in quite his old way : "What makes you so happy this evening, Barbara? You seem the very essence of a sunbeam." Barbara looked up and down and coloured a little, and then answered in her frank way : "A great many things ; more things than you would care to hear, if I could tell them."

"Try me. I am not the most patient of men, but I think I could hear you out." Dr. Strath spoke jestingly, but there was a little anxiety plainly discernible in his manner. Barbara hesitated. "I think what chiefly makes me happy is that I have found my place and my work at last ; and, and—met with appreciation." The last was almost inaudible.

"That needs explanation. Let us deal with the first thing. You have found your work, you say?" His voice was peremptory, but his eyes questioned her eagerly. "What work, and what place, Barbara?"

"Perhaps you will hardly understand me, but your mother will. I have been listless and unoccupied so long, that the prospect of a full and engrossing occupation, that shall leave me no time to feed upon my silly thoughts, is so great a boon that no one but myself can comprehend what it is to me."

"You mean Nigel's lessons, I suppose, and your desire of becoming an artist? I thought my cousin had effectually crushed those hopes. He said very little in your favour that day, I remember."

"And he says still less now ; but for all that I can feel my own progress. You must not think I am only ambitious, Norman ; I am far more humble now in my own estimation than I have ever been."

"What an acknowledgment from Barbara Heathcote !"

"Ah ! but it is true. I have not half such grand hopes now I am really working, as when I was only dreaming. I love my art dearly, and I mean to worship her always ; but I do not think I shall ever be a great or even a good artist : but I mean to paint my dear old pine-woods, and to paint them well, and some people will like my pictures, and buy them. I shall try and try to do better all my life long ; so that at the last it may be said of me, 'Bab was an earnest worker, and an earnest thinker, and that is all.'"

Barbara had often talked in this strain to Mrs. Strath, but never to Norman ; and he looked at her now with something of dawning reverence on his face. He had often thought her

foolish and fanciful, morbid in her imaginings, crude, with all womanish crudeness. But after all, was it not a noble thing for this young girl to devote the best interests of her life to some high thing rather than waste it with the empty and vain trifling of other women, whose most important daily avocations seem to be to dress, work embroidery, and kill time by dreary inches of drossy labour? Many are the foolish and empty utterances against women usurping intellectual rights, when their very conscientiousness bids them to aspire; timidly, yet with all sense of right, they lay out their one poor little talent received from the Great Master, trading with it honestly, hoping or praying that it may yield some sweet harvest of content, or, failing that, that He, from whom proceeded the Divine afflatus, may say of them, in loving pity, "She hath done what she could." Mrs. Strath looked wistfully at her son now, to see how he had taken Barbara's speech. "You do not think it wrong for Barbara to try to be an artist, Norman? What can she do better for herself, poor child?"

"There is a discrepancy in your speech, mother. I do not think it wrong for Barbara to follow the bent of her own mind, or choose her own pursuit; but yet I hold that she could do better."

"How, and in what way?" asked Barbara eagerly. But Dr. Strath hesitated: it seemed difficult for him to answer that question.

"Come, we have a right to demand your opinions," said his mother. "What could Barbara do better?"

"I think I must modify my last speech a little. Perhaps for the present, and as she now is, Barbara could not do better than she is now doing. She is unoccupied, restless: her life is monotonous, and we cannot deny her talent. I believe I was the first who acknowledged its existence."

"Yes, indeed, Norman, and you have my best gratitude for that."

He looked at her softly for a moment, and then continued, "I own the charm and usefulness of her employment, and its expediency, nay, its full benefit; but yet, personally and truly, I would rather see her in any other position than that she holds at present."

"Worse and worse; you are becoming perfectly enigmatical." Barbara's tone was a little impatient.

"That is because you do not understand him, my dear. Can you not speak a little more plainly, Norman?"

"Yes, if Barbara wishes ; but I believe both you and she understand me well enough. You both know my views about women. I would rather see Barbara in future years a happy wife than toiling at covering canvas with full hands and an empty heart."

Barbara drew a long breath, and became a little pale. There was no mistaking Norman's meaning now.

"But what," she asked, not without emotion, "if in her plan of life only the empty heart be vouchsafed her?"

"Then God help her ; for no artist's life, however high and noble, can satisfy a woman's heart."

"Amen," returned Barbara softly, and such a look answered her, only it was lost in the darkness.

They could not see each other's faces now for the gathering gloom. Mrs. Strath thought of ringing for candles, but the others exclaimed against such a preposterous notion, and Dr. Strath proposed that they should take a turn in the garden. His mother was tired, but Barbara made no objection. "Only, how about the article for the *Lancet*?" she observed rather mischievously.

"Ah, I shall have to sit up an hour later, that is all," he returned quietly. And then they went out together, and began to pace the garden paths side by side.

"Have we quite discussed the first part of the subject, Barbara?"

"Yes ; oh yes !"

"Well, now for the second, that related to appreciation I think."

"Oh, but that's nothing ; nothing that will interest you I mean," she observed confusedly.

"You don't half know what will interest me, Barbara. Anything that concerns you is sure to do it. Don't you know that, little one?" Norman had never called her "little one" before, and as he said it he took her hand and put it on his arm. And again that strange unexplainable feeling of happiness came over her ; but now, as then, she did not question, she only felt contented and at rest. She could tell him anything now.

"I am a little curious as to what you mean by appreciation ; suppose you tell me, Barbara."

She gave an odd shy laugh. "Perhaps I put my thoughts a little too plainly in words. What I mean is that so few people like or care for me, as they do for Hester ; that when

they are kind and give me sympathy, I am as glad and refreshed as a thirsty man would be who has a draught of cool pure water given him."

"What a feverish simile. Are you so thirsting for love, Barbara? Who gives you appreciation?"

"Your mother does, and Nest, and St. Ronans, too. He teaches me, and is patient and good and affectionate. I don't mind his ill-humour a bit now I understand it. I can see he cares for me; he ought—he is 'Bab's master, you know;' and then there is you, Norman."

"I, my child!" she could not see his face, for they were under the shadow of the trees now, but something in his voice was new to her. "What am I to you, Barbara?"

Barbara found she could not answer that question well, so she returned evasively: "What am I to you, you mean. Don't you remember, Norman, you called me your little friend. I am that, am I not?"

"Without doubt, Barbara. Do you like that title?"

"Yes, indeed, I am proud to bear it. I used to think you liked Hester best."

"Did you?" he returned, very much startled.

"Yes, I even thought you wanted to marry her—not that I minded that, you know." Here Barbara stopped in great confusion, conscious that she had said too much in her outspoken frankness, and very much ashamed of herself.

"You would not have minded that, Barbara?" His voice sounded cold, displeased. What had she said to hurt him?

"No, of course not; at least not then. That's when we quarrelled so much, you know. Now I think I would rather have you as you are. Hester might not have liked us to be friends," she added, laughing. Bab said this in all simplicity and good faith, but it worked wonders. Every trace of coldness vanished from Dr. Strath's voice as he answered: "And you thought I liked Hester, eh?"

"Yes, Norman, and not only Hester but Connie. I did not think you had a bit of liking for poor Bab, you laughed at her so."

"Did I?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes, you were often very rude and bitter, sir, and often cross; and I could not talk to you, or tell you anything for fear of your ridicule; but you are much kinder to me now—oh much, much kinder."

"I was always kind to you in my heart, Barbara. You do not know what a hard life I had."

"Had you, Norman? Do you mean in your profession?"

"Yes, it has been all up-hill work, a struggle with poverty, often a bitter struggle. My first duty is to my mother, Barbara."

"Of course, of course," she answered, wondering what he meant by that, but thinking he expected some sort of reply, as he paused.

"I want to give her a better home than she has at present, to restore her to a little of her former position. I think I see my way to it now. Those shares in the Spanish mine that I purchased from your father are yielding plentiful profits. I see the time, Barbara, when I may dare to hope to achieve happiness. I have been very patient—very, very patient."

She wondered a little more at this, for Norman was not given to praising himself; he was generally singularly reticent on all that concerned himself.

"It is only to be patient a little longer, but it seems harder than ever just now; harder, but right. Well, so you care for your friend a little, Barbara?"

"A great deal," returned Barbara earnestly.

"Thank God. Only—only—I fear——"

"What do you fear, Norman?"

"Nay, I cannot tell, I am getting morbid and nervous, I suppose. Oh, Barbara, Barbara, be faithful to me!"

His tone thrilled her dumbly with a sense of coming evil, and a feeling of intense sweetness. The air was full of perfumy darkness now; a young moon trembled out at them, and withdrew into a shining cloud; great tears gathered in Barbara's eyes; a vague pain tightened at her heart, and unconsciously her hand pressed Dr. Strath's arm more closely. What did he mean? What did he dread? Why was she to be faithful to him?

They heard Mrs. Strath's voice calling to them from the lighted window. Norman stopped and unloosed Barbara's clinging hand. "You must go in alone, I have a patient to see. Tell my mother so, please."

"But I must go home Norman, and you have not bid me good-night."

"Good-night, good-night," he returned gently, and strode away. In another moment he was beside her again. "Never forget what I have said, Barbara; you may have to remember it one day. Ah, child—little Barbara—be faithful to me!" And then before she could answer he was down the garden, and she could hear the gate swing behind him.

CHAPTER XIX.

"BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY."

"Of all the knots which nature ties,
The secret, sacred sympathies,
That, as with viewless chains of gold,
The heart a happy prisoner hold ;
None is more chaste, more bright, more pure,
Stronger stern trials to endure ;
None is more pure of earthly leaven,
More like the love of highest heaven,
Than that which binds in bonds how blest
A daughter to a father's breast."

W. CUNNINGHAM.

THAT night was a long puzzle to Barbara. Sleep was out of the question, a popular delusion and snare, bed only a conglomeration of hot pillows, and nightmarish confusion of thought, of tumbled-down imaginations, and wide open stares into the darkness ; it was all very well to lie flat, like an image, with your arms close to your sides, and shut your eyes and say you will not stir for the next quarter of an hour—in the next twenty seconds, perhaps less, the image is bolt upright again, a trifle more dishevelled and wide awake, and off again on the treadmill of endless conjecture eked out by irritable yawns. "It is all a pack of rubbish trying to sleep," grumbled Barbara, and by and by two little white feet crept hither and thither in the glimmering moonlight, and in process of time a rolled-up figure, with an intensely curly head, established itself, like a small Turk, on the low broad window-seat in a perfect cosy of pillows : "and now, if I don't think it all out and have done with it, my name is not Barbara Heathcote." And so well did she think it out, that after three hours of patient brain labour, and alternate hot and cold fits, in the midst of waning moonbeams and summer dews, she resolved it at last into three conclusions equally terse and admirable.

First, that St. Ronans was an astonishing enigma, for he certainly liked Bab, and Bab liked him.

Secondly, that she could not make out Norman at all—at all.

Thirdly, take it all in all, and the present state of politics in Europe, which was conducive to the progress of free thought, she certainly liked Norman the best.

But to arrive at these excellent conclusions had been laborious, not to say heart-searching, in the extreme, and despite her wisdom and her twenty-one years, Barbara just missed the solution of her enigmatical questions by the want of one small golden key, which, if nicely fitted and properly applied, would certainly have unlocked all present and future mysteries, and made the world a very different place to this one small woman. But Barbara, a prey to the most hopeless and refined sentimentalism, and given to look at all such questions from an intellectual and singularly humble point of view, harped for ever and a day on friendship, and never for a single instant touched the small chord of love, a chord which, if touched ever so lightly, would have set that passionate yearning nature aflame in a moment, but, as is the case with many another dreamer, the time had not come yet. It had never occurred to Barbara that Dr. Strath loved her; how could it?—their friendship was of too old a date, and too well disguised to allow of such knowledge on her part; her nature was too simple and childlike, too truly and painfully humble to admit such a thought, unless it were most plainly forced upon her. In her own heart she said to herself that she was not one to find favour in any man's eyes, and though she sometimes dreamt, as women will, of some stranger dropping in their midst, some wandering artist or stray satellite of fame lighting down amongst them and recognising a kindred spirit in the doctor's little daughter, wooing her in the old pine-woods, and taking her to some far-away city-home, yet Bab knew these were only worthless dreams, built of summer clouds and her own vague yearnings, and always shook herself out of them with a sigh, saying that Barbara Heathcote would live and die Barbara Heathcote—enrolled as a member of the order of the "Unappropriated Blessings,"—the old maids of England.

Strange contradiction of womanhood, Barbara said this and believed it, and openly vaunted it in social and family gatherings, and yet every spring she looked out with misty eyes, and vague longing for some change—some happiness, she knew not what—some wonder and miracle, and beauty of life, that the budding days and bright sunshine were to bring to her.

And so she looked so far that the treasure rolled to her very feet and folded in her very hands, and she did not know it, and though her heart was warm with marvellous content, she could not trace it to its source. And so this pitiable little dreamer walked and danced along the very brink of a social

chasm, and what if it should engulf her and her too late discovered treasure together?

And she could not make out St. Ronans at all, or the princely gift with which he had endowed her; so she came to the conclusion that he was Bab's master, and that was all. And then she had them both up before her, and gravely arraigned them in the darkness, and took a mental photograph of them. "I don't know which I like the best," thought Bab, "and after to-night I must know," but why or to what purpose she was to apply such knowledge never came into her head, but she had an odd instinct that she must find out and know, and so she summoned them before her, side by side, and, by a little womanish leaning to the weaker, she had a good look at St. Ronans first.

And that took her breath away and made her cross. "Why are men so beautiful?" she thought; it might be left to women. It would take an Eve to match such an Adam, and that, too, at a time when the daughters of men were fair.

And then she began to get quarrelsome and pulled his face to pieces, feature by feature, but that would not do, so she said spitefully that she hated a perfect face, there was nothing in it after all, and every one knew he had an ill-tempered mouth, and a mouth that could sneer was the worst thing that a man could have; and when she found herself softening perceptibly to him in spite of herself, she would not look at him any more. "I am getting as fond of him as I am of Leigh," she exclaimed, "and that's a shame; how I wish he were my brother, for I enjoy taking care of him far too much, and yielding my own will to his. It opened my eyes a little to find how much I should miss and feel the want of him when he was gone:" there was a prodigious shake of the dishevelled head at this conjuncture. "I am much too fond of you, sir, and you a stranger to me a month ago, and no sort of a relation, as Hester would say; go away with you, I don't want to look at you any longer, and now for Norman."

And then the oddest feeling came over Barbara, for she felt as though she must hide her own face now: those words were sounding in her ears over and over again, "Be faithful to me, Barbara!—ah, child, little Barbara, be faithful to me!"

He was her friend, and she was to be faithful to him; that was all she knew, and all she cared about; but she also knew that those words would haunt her day and night, with a gracious mystery that the future only could solve. She seemed as though

she must hold her breath, and tread softly ever after, waiting for she knew not what, feeling only that life after all was very good.

And she knew now instinctively that Bab's friend was dearer than Bab's master.

What was it now to her that he was the plainest man she had ever seen, that he had deep-set eyes, and an overhanging brow, and a bushy mass of ugly reddish-brown beard? She only knew that those eyes had looked at her with honest kindness, that his voice was full of sweetness, and that his touch was pleasant to her.

"God bless Bab's friend!" she whispered: it was Barbara's morning prayer.

It was good to see the quiet precision and business-like decorum with which Barbara set about her duties on the morrow, though she looked a little subdued and heavy-eyed, as was natural after so prolonged a vigil. Barbara had shed no tears; but she had yawned much, and her eyelids were quite reddened for want of that refreshing slumber which youth so urgently demands; for, contrary to her usual habits, Barbara had not slept a wink, and so her eyes looked sleepily opaque. And there were no wild roses to be seen in her cheeks, and only the greyest of lilies, if there be such natural curiosities in the floral world.

And all this dimness and general stupidity for want of one night's sleep! It was a humiliating fact, but true, as an Irishman might say, that our honest, healthy, little Barbara would have made a very bad fashionable lady, and a worse Sister of Charity. Midnight gaiety and midnight vigils would soon have exhausted all that bright vitality. Bab was a true child of nature, up with the lark and early to bed; and her sleeping hours, with their exact and unerring punctuality, were quite household jokes. Half an hour later and Bab nodded at prayers; at least so Leigh averred.

And so putting two and two together, there was no little stir when Barbara appeared at breakfast, like a small owl.

"Barbara has had a sleepless night; Bab has not slept a wink. Behold the eighth wonder of the world! Send for Dr. Cummings, O ye Gallipots! Barbaretta has found no solace in the sleepy god." This latter burst from Leigh, of course. Hester looked her over with motherly eyes, recommended sal volatile and a sofa in the Harlequin room. Barbara sat and smiled at them all with extinguished eyes, and sipped her coffee with a languor which would have been alarming had it not

been so evident. It was comical to see how anxiously the doctor eyed her, and put crisp bits of toast, well buttered, on her plate; while Connie, who always looked like a piece of brilliant china at breakfast-time, fluttered about her, and was overwhelming in her personal attentions. Bab, who had received all this cossetting with as much animation and grace as a dying duck in a thunderstorm, suddenly awoke to life and wide-open eyes at hearing Hester's whispered remark that she had better defer her painting-lesson till to-morrow.

"So I think, Bab," agreed her father; "and I shall step in at St. Ronans as I pass, and tell your friend so."

"Oh, I must go!" interrupted Barbara, in alarm. "Hester is quite wrong, Daddy, and a walk this fresh morning will do me good. Do let me go down the village with you," she added coaxingly. "And if my head's bad, I'll promise not to do a stroke of painting; but I do so want to see the studio at St. Ronans, and the garden, and all that."

"Well, well, I suppose it won't hurt you; so run along and fetch your hat. You're nothing but a spoilt child," he continued, when she came back to him panting and breathless. "After all, Hester is right, I believe, and you would be better at home."

"I wish Hester would mind her own business," said Bab, pouting; and then she clasped her hands over her father's arm. The morning was delicious, and so was a walk with Daddy; besides, she had a question to ask him. So she cleared her throat, though it was as clear as a lark's already, and began:

"Daddy, do you remember that walk Norman and you and I had that moonlight evening?"

"Eh, what? What evening? We've had a good many moonlight evenings lately, haven't we?"

"Yes; but that evening when you were talking about some illness round Durnford, and Susan Moggs being so dirty, and the Board of Health."

"Yes, yes," interrupted her father hastily; "but I did not know you were with us, Barbara."

"Yes, I was. I was quite close to you, and had hold of your arm, I believe, as I have now; but I was not listening much, for I have no idea what illness you said was about Durnford—a sort of low fever, I think; but, Daddy, something Norman said about me afterwards struck me so that I can't forget it."

"I don't remember, child. Why, what was it?"

"Only such a few words ; but they were so hard and true, and they've been just like Belshazzar's writing to me ever since. Dad, I don't like even you to hear them ; but he said that the poor and sick did not know Barbara among them."

"Did he say that, little one ?"

"Ay, father, that he did ; and—and," here the girl's eyes filled with tears, "I should not like to hear that said again to me at the last day. It would sound too dreadful then, would it not ?—that the poor and sick did not know Barbara among them."

Dr. Heathcote looked grave, very grave for him, who so rarely had a reproof for one of his children.

"No, Barbara, that must never happen. I am glad you have spoken to me, my child ; it is good and brave of you, and I think I can help you. But, first, I must tell you—only you must not think it hard of me to say so—that I am very, very thankful to have this confidence ; for I have long felt that something has been wanting in you, and I have often felt rather disappointed in my little daughter."

"Disappointed in me, father ?" and then the sweetness of his smile, that bright loving smile, disarmed her. She crept nearer to his side, like a little child. "Why don't you help me to be good and do my duty, Daddy ?"

"God helping me, so I will, Barbara. Heaven forbid that one of my children should ask my assistance in vain. Try and tell me a little better and more clearly, my dear, why you are acting and feeling so differently from your sisters ? Why, even my little Connie here is treading in Hester's footsteps ? You should hear what the old women at the almshouses say about her, while the matron of the Union tells me that Hester is like an angel among them, God bless her beautiful face, for I am sure she is one to her old father. I don't think we can spare her to Sir Geoffrey Hunsden, can we, Barbara ?"

"Oh, father, don't let him marry her ! He is not worthy of her," cried Barbara impulsively. Another time this well-merited praise of one whom she always regarded as her successful rival would have kindled the bitterest jealousy in Barbara's bosom ; but just now she was far too humble and conscience-stricken for such an unworthy feeling ; besides, the influence of Bab's friend was already beginning to work. She must do something to deserve his affection. "If you wish to be happy, be good," he had often said to her ; but now, because she was happy, she wished to be good. So do generous natures reverse

the general order of things. "Oh, father, do not let him marry her!" Barbara had said; but Dr. Heathcote, with a brief sigh, answered—for he alone knew, or rather guessed, Hester's secret, "There are very few men worthy of Hester. I knew one once, but he is dead now, and Norman Strath is another;" but Barbara interrupted him in quite a flurry:

"Oh no, no. Hester would never care for Norman; you are wrong there, Daddy!"

Her father looked at her curiously and pressed her arm with a smile. "Am I, Barbara? Well, Norman's little friend ought to know. After all, Sir Geoffrey Hunsden is a good man, and I don't know that we need more; but we are running away from our subject, little woman."

Barbara looked rather ashamed.

"Yes, and we are near the end of our walk, too. How tiresome! And there is no time for explanations."

"Not even to answer my question."

"What question, Daddy?"

"Why you are the only one of us who has never felt bound to do anything for our poorer neighbours."

Now, indeed, Barbara hung her head.

"We must probe a wound sometimes, my dear, and find out the root of a disease. Let us try and discover the reason of this lifelong apathy and selfishness; for is it not selfishness, little one, to be wrapped up in our pursuits, however worthy, and our own dreams, however grand, to the exclusion of the only duty worth living for—the amelioration of suffering, and the good of our fellow-creatures?"

Dr. Heathcote was a deeply religious man; but he never talked, only acted his religion, though there were those who said that by the bedside of the hardened or the dying the doctor was as good as any clergyman; and when asked his convictions on such subjects, he had been heard once to say, that next to the priestly office he thought there was no profession so deeply and divinely responsible for the good of souls, as well as for the good of bodies, as the work of a physician.

Therefore, though he rarely rebuked even an erring child, it was at once his habit and delight to drop in a word in season. Those only who lived with him knew the habitual sweetness and wisdom of the man, and how he would convey a reproof in a jest, and make a wrong-doer ashamed by the quiet dignity of a look. Barbara, who adored her father, used to speak of the continual sunshine of his presence as of something holy; seldom,

indeed, did she venture on any of her petulant speeches or cross-grained satire before him, or bring out a particle of her hoarded wrath till he was far down the village, and she had no longer reason to fear the soft-spoken "Barbara!" that always reduced her to an abashed silence.

They had come to the turning now which led down by the fir-plantations to St. Ronans, but Barbara never quitted her father's arm; she only walked thoughtfully on. How was she to answer him? How was she to answer this question with her usual frankness and truth, now that she was so self-condemned in her own eyes, and he was disappointed in her? At last she said:

"I think I have found it out. It is nothing more or less than moral cowardice."

The doctor nodded, with an approving smile.

"That's my brave Barbara; you see we have got to the root of the matter at last, have we not?"

"I think so, father."

"No doubt—no doubt, there is nothing like this bugbear of moral cowardice, after all, for frightening us off the path of duty. It is all the more dangerous and insidious an enemy, because it wears an amiable front, and tempts us to no daring dereliction of duty, but only omissions which seem often puerile and innocent in the extreme. You see, I speak feelingly, Barbara, for I also am daunted by this bugbear; it often makes me hold my tongue for fear of giving pain, so that sometimes I miss giving a wholesome rebuke, when the said rebuke would be salutary and useful. I am afraid you have inherited this failing from your father, Barbara; but we must grapple with it inch by inch, as we would with any grave sin, and we shall, 'Deo gratias,' get the victory at last."

Barbara had never heard her father speak so seriously before; it awed her, but at the same time gave her strength. After a little while she said:

"I think my special form of moral cowardice is the rooted aversion I have to seeing any kind of physical or mental pain; and this is what has made me dread coming in contact with our poor. I was so afraid that I might have to witness painful scenes, and that their miseries might haunt me, without my having the means of alleviating them."

"Is Hester, then, devoid of feeling?" returned Dr. Heathcote reproachfully; "or do you think that Norman and I do not meet with harrowing sights, and every form of squalid and

physical wretchedness, which it is our profession and happiness to relieve?"

Barbara was silent.

"'I was naked, and ye clothed me; sick and in prison, and ye visited me.' Ah, Barbara, my little daughter, when the merciful Judge casts up your dealings with His poor, how will such selfish excuses avail you then?"

"Father, I see it; I have seen it a long time. I am ready to go with you now, if you like."

"No, not to-day, but to-morrow; but I cannot take you on my rounds, if that is what you mean. There is low fever round Durnford; and though, thank God, it has not made its appearance yet in Sunningford, still we must be on our guard, as I told Hester; and as I have already restricted her visits, it will not do to let you begin yours. But, as I don't like damping a good resolution, you may go and see an old patient of mine who lives just on the brow of Bex Hill,—there can be no possible risk of contagion there; but promise me one thing, Barbara, that you go into no cottage but where I send you."

"Yes, yes," returned Barbara impatiently; she wanted to hear more of this woman, but, to her vexation, the doctor drew out his heavy gold repeater, and, after some consummate calculation that its age and eccentricities demanded, put it back into his pocket with a face of dismay.

"Why, you chatterbox, you have nearly made me lose an appointment: run off; and if you meet Norman by the way, tell him I am at Widow Green's."

"Very well," answered Barbara, and she put up her face and kissed him gratefully, and the hope of seeing Norman kept her company all the way back; but she was disappointed, for she did not encounter him till she reached the lodge-gates of St. Ronans, and then he rode by so fast that, though she ran in the hope of attracting his attention, he did not see her, and was out of sight in a moment. "Norman always wants to make people believe that he is riding on an errand of life or death," said Barbara grudgingly; and then she turned into the trim lawns and pleasant shades of St. Ronans.

Barbara had seen the gardens often, but she had never been in the house itself; and as all her notions of splendour were derived from the ancient shabbiness of Hunsden Park, she was not a little amazed when she found herself in the St. Ronans' drawing-room.

"Why, it is a room fit for a queen!" cried Barbara; and

then she paused, on finding herself reflected in a full-length mirror, and began curtseying to it in mock satire: "Oh, you little frump—you dowdy," she observed, apostrophising her own image, "what have you done with your eyes, I wonder?" and she subsided, preternaturally solemn, on a great velvet lounge, only just in time, as it happened, for the door opened suddenly; but, after all, it was only Nest, in her fresh morning dress, and with a rose in her girdle.

"Oh, you dear child, Barbara, is it you? Nie has been waiting for you an hour; we've been placing your easel, and were afraid you were not coming after all. Come along; we must not wait a moment." And so saying, she half dragged and half led Barbara into the depths of the large shady hall, and then into a small anteroom full of ferns, as green as a bower, and pushing open a door, cried out: "Here she is, Nie. Come in, Barbara."

Barbara held her breath, and trode over the threshold daintily; and her eyes got large and round in a moment, for she found herself in such a beautiful room as she had never been in in her life before.

A long shady room, with three noble windows opening on to a smooth green lawn, with wonderful carved cabinets and tall ebony chairs, old Venetian mirrors and grand pieces of colouring strewn hither and thither in some marvellously worked banners, and odd pieces of velvet drapery, together with all sorts of precious objects of ormolu and bric-à-brac, and hoards of old china and antique vases gathered in years of foreign travel. Barbara had read and dreamt of such a room: no wonder she now stood rivetted upon the threshold. In the midst of them all, at his easel, stood her old acquaintance, dressed in a suit of some strange foreign stuff that looked all white and cool, with no collar, and the ends of his blue tie knotted loosely together, looking like a German student, with his rough light hair and budding moustache.

"You are handsomer than ever; that's what you are, Grey eyes," groaned Barbara. But of course she did not say so; she only stood quietly by, while Nigel put in a finishing stroke, and then turned round and quietly greeted her.

When he saw her admiring face, he broke out into a laugh. "Why, what great eyes you have, little wolf! Come here, and tell me how you liked your picture, and what you have done with yourself since we parted twenty-four hours ago—and what you think of my studio—and why you are so pale. Is she

not pale, *ma mie*? Whatever has my pupil been doing with herself?"

Barbara had rather a difficulty in warding off the last question; but she poured out such a volley of thanks for the picture, mingled with notes of admiration, that she completely turned his thoughts into another channel; indeed, he received her homage of praise most superbly, and seemed to court it rather than otherwise, by opening manifold portfolios, and displaying their varied contents before her admiring eyes—doing the honours of his studio, in fact, with the magnificence of an artistic sultan; and they had so much to say and do, that they had no lesson after all.

For after Nigel had shown her all his home and foreign productions, and Barbara's rhapsodies had sunk into a silence more eloquent than words, he proceeded to overhaul all his treasures of art for her inspection; and as this was a most fitting opportunity for forming her taste, and as this was only to be done by making her admire the things he admired, and as, even in matters of art, Barbara was not naturally docile, but had a decided will of her own, it took rather a roundabout process and a great many words to convince her judgment and her eyes; and so before they had half completed the tour of the studio, and she was still in the midst of a most forcible description of an Etruscan vase, found, according to antiquarians, amidst the lava of a buried city, the luncheon bell rang on their incredulous ears.

"Who could have believed it!" exclaimed Nigel, with a slightly vexed air; "and I have an engagement immediately afterwards. Well, never mind, Barbara; you must come earlier to-morrow, and spend the whole day. The Madre will be out, and we will have a little dinner all to ourselves, you and I and Nest;—oh, we will have old Norman to make the quartette. Come, is it a bargain?"

"Oh yes!" cried Barbara joyfully; and then a cold doubt rose to her mind, "but will Lady Strath approve?"

Nigel laughed lightly. "Lady Strath likes everything that I like. I am master in this house, never fear; so you will come to-morrow."

"Do come," whispered Nest, as she twined her arms round her. "I must show you the house, and my own room, and all my pretty things." And the gong sounding again, this time rather impatiently, Barbara promised more decidedly, and took up her hat to go; but, as she made her exit, she narrowly

escaped meeting Lady Strath on the terrace—"a piece of good luck," as she wickedly told Hester afterwards.

There was a slight cloud on Lady Strath's face as she took her seat at the table. "I caught sight of your new whim in the distance, Nigel."

"An ambiguous phrase, Madre mia ; do you mean my new pointer?"

"Oh no, Nigel ; if it were Zoe, I think I could more easily forgive your infatuation, for the beauty of her glossy coat ; but I was speaking of your last absurdity. Fancy, with your refined taste, picking up such an oddity as that Barbara for notice."

Nigel frowned. "My oddity has talent, mother."

"Well, so has Bep." Bep was a small monkey, with very bright eyes, that Nigel kept for his occasional delectation. "Now I come to think of it, this new oddity is not unlike Bep."

"Oh, mother, how can you !" and Nest looked pained and frightened, as she always did when any one seemed displeased, as Nigel did now ; but Lady Strath did not appear to notice it.

"Come now, Nigel, own that you see the resemblance in your favourite to Bep. I think I shall call her so ; it is much shorter, and quite as pretty as Barbara."

"You are in a complimentary mood, mother." There was an ominous gleam in his eyes.

"I am glad you think so. Now I come to compare the two, I am almost of opinion that the good looks are on Bep's side."

What more she was going to add never transpired ; for, to her unmitigated amazement, Nigel uttered an exclamation, rather strong than pleasant, and left the room ; and Lady Strath was left in peace to digest her joke as best she might.

And she did digest it—and so well, too, that she came to the conclusion that, whereas she had been placidly indifferent to Nigel's pet and pupil, she now cordially disliked her ; and something that was half distrust and half fear mingled with her dislike, and made her heaven of content in time little better than one long brooding cloud.

CHAPTER XX.

BARBARA REFUSES TO CONJUGATE "AMO."

"*Iago* : What an eye she has ! Methinks it sounds a parley of provocation.

"*Cassio* : An inviting eye ; and yet methinks right modest."
SHAKESPEARE.

"From which I escaped heart free,
With the least little touch of spleen."
TENNYSON.

THIS was another red-letter day in Barbara's special and peculiar calendar ; in speaking of it afterwards she always called this visit to St. Ronans a glimpse of an earthly paradise. This was her way of talking, a sort of girlish hyperbole of expression ; and yet in every one's life have there not been such days, some of them veritable holy days, which have stood apart from all others after the manner of old saints, each in its niche, with its separate aureole round its head—days of proud benison and of choice pleasure, when the sky was never so blue, and our hearts never so full of sunshine, and life was so good—so good that we thought we could never be tired, never weep, never grow "weary of well-doing," and all the future was transfigured before us. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," such was the motto of the wise epicurean, speaking from the depths of a blind-fold philosophy, and gauging life at its lowest. "Master, it is good for us to be here ;" so spake in other language the bold disciple, when the awful overshadowing of visible glory drew from him the utterance of mysterious longing. "Master, it is good for us to be here : " is not such the unspoken yearning of every human heart ? It is good for us—never to be weary, never to shed idle tears over unceasing wrecks : here we would tarry in some terrestrial temple, or some quiet of domestic peace ; here would we erect our tabernacle ; here the haven where we would be—"Master, it is good for us to be here." Ah, not for us Mount Tabor in the wilderness, and not for us the calm of unbroken rest ; already, as we descend from transcendental heights of inner communings, we find dressed for our needs some meal of bitter herbs of which we must needs partake ; let us gird up our loins, then, and eat humbly ; and as faithful pilgrims make no long tarrying at the earthly shrines they visit,

so let us shroud up our past blessings, burying our dead out of sight, not longing, not lingering, not regretting, bearing present evil with what patience we may, till we come at last to those portals whose name is peace.

"I think it is worth while being born to live one such long delicious day," thought Barbara, when she awoke on the morrow; and, as she thought of it all, introspection and retrospection became a delightful process. Barbara's healthy cravings required no richly-spiced condiments, but when they came they were all the more enjoyed from former abstinence. First, they had a long delightful morning in the studio. Not that they had much of a lesson, after all: when Barbara had painted for an hour, and had just warmed up to her subject, Nigel threw his arms up over his head, and proposed a change of occupation.

"Very well," answered Barbara, in a tone of regret, and she put aside her palette with slow reluctance, eyeing sadly her well-mixed colours; but in another ten minutes she had forgotten all about it, for she was seated on the floor, in the midst of portfolios, costly prints, and photographs, with Nigel kneeling in the midst, enriching every view and picture, as he showed it to her, with anecdotes and adventures, some ludicrous some pathetic, while Barbara looked and listened, and thought him the cleverest and most amusing companion in the world, and felt almost as if she were on a moral Tom Tiddler's ground, picking up gold and silver; and before they had thought the morning half gone, Nest summoned them to a dainty little luncheon served up in the small green anteroom, in the midst of ferns and orchids; and afterwards they went out into the garden. They were very pretty gardens, gay, and shaded, and cool, as they should be, but rather too trim and well ordered for Barbara's taste, who liked wildness in Nature, and preferred her own dark lawn at home to these brilliant parterres and terraces blazing with scarlet geraniums.

But the grass was like nothing she ever felt—green as an emerald, and soft, springy, and smooth as velvet. Barbara would have liked to have rolled down the slope, as she had seen the school-children do at Hunsden Park; but remembering she was grown up, she and Nest had a run down instead, and never stopped till they came to the brink of a fair sheet of water, quite a miniature lake, and there they found Nigel paddling about lazily in a very small boat under the elm-trees. He put to shore on seeing them, and took them in—a piece of

good-nature he dearly rued, for Barbara nearly upset them twice, besides steering them on to the duck-islands in the midst of a willow-tree, and sending them three times most violently on the land, by mismanaging her oars. She got on better afterwards, and rowed them about till she was as red as a peony, but she told Nest afterwards that she thought she managed her oars very gracefully, as Nigel had said she got on like a crab, "and a crab's movements are retrograde or side-long, are they not, Nest?—I am sure I forget which—and that is just what rowing ought to be; and did not I feather my oars prettily? But, oh, just look at the blisters on my hands;" and as Barbara raised her palms daintily, she had a twinge of remorse for her afternoon's amusement, for Bab's one weakness was a dislike to spoiling her hands.

Nigel had given her a few directions, and then he drew his broad-brimmed hat over his eyes and tried to go to sleep; but after he had found his mouth full of weeds on the duck-island, and angry quacks close to his ear, and had had his head brought into painful contiguity with a branch, he got a little impatient, and requested to put to land; but Barbara begged so hard to remain, that he consented to moor the boat in the shade, and while he lay full length on the slope under the trees, the girls kept their seats and fed the swans with sweet cake, watched the kingfishers as they came to drink—tried to catch a dragon-fly, dipped their hands in the water, and did all manner of childish things, and by and by they fell to telling each other stories. Nest told one first—a touching little episode of peasant life, that she had witnessed in her wanderings; it was sweet and pathetic, and it told like a strain of music. Nigel's came next—a legend of the Black Forest; and then it was Barbara's turn.

Barbara put it off as long as she could. "When I once begin, I never know where to stop," as she honestly remarked; but their persuasion overruled her, and so she commenced, and her face and her voice and her story combined made up such a study that Nigel never removed his eyes from her. "She would make her fortune on the stage, this oddity," he thought. "What unheard-of nonsense! and yet how well she tells it!"

But what it was all about nobody knew; not even Barbara herself, for it had no beginning or end. It seemed to burst out somewhere in the middle, got rather crazy as it proceeded, and left off in a helplessly insane manner at the end. It presupposed so many remarkable things, and made so many false

starts, which, like racers on a Derby-day, were brought up short, and got on such innumerable wrong scents, that it was quite a relief when the narrator paused from want of breath, in the midst of a most exciting scene, and drew down a violent curtain and a fit of laughing together. Barbara laughed till the tears ran down her face—she was enjoying herself, there was no mistake; but Nigel never removed his eyes from her.

"So you make your hero wear the armour of the Middle Ages, and drink the red wine through the helmet barred, and wear Fouché's best four-and-sixpenny, all at the same time."

"Why, you see," returned Barbara, in the same tone of enjoyment, "I am supposing a story of a hundred years hence."

"Then, why did you not say so? I wonder if you have any conception of the rubbish you have been talking, Barbara, and for a whole hour, too. Nest, here, thinks you possessed."

"I thought it a very pretty story," returned Nest innocently, "if I had only understood it; but why did not Mona marry the young knight? There was no reason why she should not, Barbara. Do go on—it is not half finished—and bring them together again."

Barbara moved restlessly. "I never finish my stories," she said.

"In the name of all that's enigmatical, why not?" and Nigel looked at her in great astonishment.

"Or, if I did," returned Barbara slowly, "I should never make my heroines happy."

"Worse and worse. I do believe you're nothing but a witch, Barbara; be quick and tell us why, or you will be flying away on your broomstick, with your hair out on end rather more than it is at present. What a crazy head it is!"

"If I gave them an end at all," she answered indifferently, "I should make them die, or go into a nunnery, or do any possible or impossible thing, except marry and live happily ever after."

"What a bloodthirsty Barbara!—but why?"

"That's my affair," she returned, nodding her head provokingly. "There's nothing like a man for curiosity, after all: talk about women, they are mild in comparison. As for you, St. Ronans, you're as bad as a judge and a jury put together, to say nothing of the learned gentleman in the wig who cross-examines the witnesses; and if there's one thing I hate," continued Bab, casting up her eyes virtuously, "it's being put into a moral witness-box."

"But surely Bab's master has a right to examine his pupil as much as he likes."

"Bab's master has a great many privileges, but I am not sure that is one of them."

"But only this one question, Barbara," he went on coaxingly. There was importunity—nay, persistence—in his eyes. "Just tell me why you never make your heroine end happily? I confess I am curious, and shall be till you tell me."

"Oh, nonsense," said Barbara sharply; "what a fuss you make about nothing, St. Ronans." She was a little nettled, or rather put to it, or she would never have answered him so crossly. "Well, if you must pry into a little womanish weakness, know once for all that Bab never likes her heroines to be happier than herself."

And the moment she had said it she was ready to shake herself with vexation.

"You're a downright idiot, that's what you are, Barbara," she thought; "a pretty laughing-stock you have made of yourself by not being able to hold your tongue;" and then her face became a mass of sulky blushes.

"Are you not happy, then, Barbarina mia?" There was a curious tone of triumph in Nigel's voice which roused all her opposition in a moment; but she was wily for once, and did not show it.

"I am glad there is but one Barbara Heathcote in the world," she said, with a little sigh.

"There can be but one," he returned softly.

Barbara turned a deaf ear to him, and rushed on:

"I think it a very good thing"—this in a tone of great decision. "Barbara is nothing better, after all, than a foolish fretful child who cries for the moon, and if she got it to-morrow would only find it was made of green cheese. Pshaw! I have no patience with her;" and Barbara gave a great stamp with her foot, as though she meant it.

"I know a foolish fretful girl, whom I should like to have always near me, and whom I could make very, very happy, and myself, too. Do you know her, Barbara?"

It was a declaration of love, or at least it would have sounded so to any other woman; but there was something almost touching in Barbara's humility and self-depreciation: she neither understood, nor cared to understand, the implied meaning of his words; in her wildest dreams she would not have imagined it. That this man, with his beautiful face,

could condescend to her—the doctor's daughter,—to her, plain Barbara,—was a thing not to be lightly credited or easily entertained. Granted that his voice was unusually tender, and his words full of affection, that did not help to enlighten her: she had always been used to a good deal of attention from him; from the first he had placed her on the footing of a pupil and pet; while Barbara, on her part, had not been entirely free from a sort of innocent coquetry, as in the case of the two roses; but it had always been so childlike and so frankly expressed, that Nigel must have been the vainest of men to rate it at anything but its true value; it was only the way she had of showing gratitude for small favours—shy utterances, as it were, from a loving but reticent nature.

Bab did not understand him in the least; but she had a feeling that he was getting too much for her in more ways than one, so she got up and made him a curtsy. "Bab is much obliged to you, sir, for patting her so kindly on the head. To tell you the truth, she means well; but does not know how to manage it. That's English, is it not?"

"Sit down by me: I will teach you an Italian verb—'amore,' Barbarina mia—'amo.'"

Barbara executed a little dance and fairly stopped her ears. "Much obliged to you, St. Ronans; but I couldn't, really. My mother-tongue is quite good enough for the likes of me; and now, with your august permission, I will bid you good-bye, as Nest is going to show me her room and all her pretty things."

"I could not hear of it," he returned promptly. "Come and sit down by me, Barbara; do you hear?" and he stretched out his hand as though to enforce obedience; but Barbara still danced before him, and out of his reach.

"Say, do you like the animated No? That's Cowper, Sir Nigel, he of the nightcaps and the hares, the mild and melancholy Cowper, who sang so sweetly of a sofa and the cup that cheers but not inebriates. I will translate the phrase genteelly for you, shall I?" and Bab made him a low salaam—"I won't," and then scudded over the lawn, calling back, "St. Ronans, St. Ronans, is that an animated No?"

There was a hot sparkle in Nigel's eyes, and then he got up and walked down to the water, kicking a loose pebble before him. "You may laugh. Let them laugh that win, as I shall win one day, Barbara."

A mocking peal answered him. Barbara stood up on the

terrace high above him, with her hands trumpeted together, and her voice sounding sweet and shrill in the distance, "St. Ronans, St. Ronans, is that an animated No?"

Barbara was delighted with Nest's room; its soft daintiness pleased her, and its fresh white and pink draperies. It had such pure surroundings, such cosy couches, such Parian groups niched hither and thither; but after a while she grew discontented with it. It had no pictures, it was like the room of a child; but she did not put her thoughts in words till afterwards, for just then Nest unlocked a casket and placed it before her, and Barbara was gloating over the glittering heaps with coveting heart and the eyes of a miser. "It is well to be you, Nest, and not Barbara Heathcote." So had a few shining toys brought out the avarice of Bab's nature; and as she spoke she drew forth a wondrous serpent with ruby eyes and its gold tail in its mouth, and slung it on her small round arm, and then another and another, some with green and some with red stones, set cunningly in the bright yellow gold till it glittered all over with strange sparkles. "I always knew I was a Sybarite at heart," continued Barbara honestly, "if I had only the chance of indulging my natural tastes; and who knows but the crumpled rose-leaf may hinder my slumbers yet? Why do you show me these?" she went on. "You are making me break the Tenth Commandment, and inciting me to envy."

"Not you, Barbara."

"Why not me?" she answered, in the same tone of mock distress. "I am not above these weaknesses, as you suppose. I like fine clothes and luxurious houses, and all the pomps and vanities of this so-called wicked world, which my catechism bids me renounce, and which I wouldn't, if I had the chance—not a bit of it. I should feel much happier if I could always hang these sparkling chains on me, and cover my fingers knuckle-deep in diamonds. I should like them to flash as yours do whenever they move. Oh dear! oh dear! I wish I were a sultana!"

"Why, Bab?" said Nest, laughing. "Why, you foolish Bab, I do believe you are in earnest."

"Of course I am," she replied, nodding; and there was no mistaking the greed in her eyes.

Nest Strath knew very little about human nature; so she was filled with surprise at Bab's honest avowal, in fact it rather disappointed her. She wanted her friend to be as indifferent to all these things as she was herself. Her face looked grave and

disapproving. "You, of all people, to care for such trifles as these!" and she pushed them contemptuously from her.

"Trifles! they are splendid realities. Are you not proud of them, Nest?"

"I? I hate them. No, it is wrong to say that; but I would never wear one again if I could help it. I used to feel the veriest slave that ever was when I put them on; their weight and brilliancy oppressed me. I used to envy your grey dress, Barbara; but you never look like a little 'nun now."

Barbara mutely pointed to her grey folds.

"Yes, I know: but the plainness and simplicity of it is gone. It is soft, but not sombre, with the blue ribbon and those rich carnations tucked in your belt. You are not vain, Barbara—not really, I believe; but you have learnt how to dress yourself. Your colours are always harmonious and well chosen; but somehow, I liked you best as you were."

Barbara began to pout. "You are very disagreeable, Nest. Never mind my dress, I have but one silk in the world. Hester is so stingy; but what is the good of all these pretty things if you won't put them on?"

"To deck Nigel's wife." What made Barbara flush up at that? "I shall never wear anything but my pearls again—my pearls with the tiny diamond cross. I am fond of my white shining cross; the rest shall all go to the woman that Nie loves, I have made up my mind to that. Jewels and deformity ought never to go together."

"You are a monomaniac on that point, Nest. I wish you would not misname a little crookedness."

"A little crookedness, Barbara? Come, let us lock up these glittering things; they are nothing but a false dazzle after all. I won't say you have fallen in my estimation by admiring them too much; but I do wish, oh! I do wish that you were above this weakness."

"Do you? Then I am very glad I expressed myself so openly, for anything is better than sailing under false colours, and being thought better than you really are. Always make the worst of yourself, is my advice, and then no one is disappointed."

Barbara said this with a little toss and in a tone so much resembling the "come on" of a pugilistic street boy, that Nest hastened to kiss away her words, and begged her to forget them; "for if my mind be as narrow as my chest," she said, "and

bent at all in a wrong direction, it won't do to influence a great healthy mind like yours," and her long hair swept over Barbara as she leant her cheek against hers.

Barbara returned her caresses in a rough hasty way. "You are an angel, that's what you are, Nest ; and I, Heaven forgive me, am a wicked little woman : and why have you got pink walls and Parian children with bare legs in those funny little niches, and no pictures ?"

"I have one, I will show it to you presently," and Nest pointed reverently to a curtain dropped down before a carved prie-Dieu. "I have quaint notions of my own, *cara mia*—one of my fancies is that I care to have no picture but one in my sleeping-room."

"And that is——"

"The picture of the Crucified."

Barbara winced and looked uncomfortable.

"You have got it behind that curtain there ?"

Nest nodded assent.

"Well, why do you hide it ?"

"I don't hide it, Barbara ; I only shroud it up from careless eyes : you may go and look at it if you like."

Barbara did so and returned.

"Well ?"

"Well, it is very beautiful ; no one would look at that carelessly."

"I have another reason," said Nest, in a low voice, "I am alone in my opinion, but what of that ? I cannot bear that subject being made too public, it is too sacred, too heartrending, too terrible to be looked at except for purposes of devotion ; when my thoughts are cold and wandering, and I cannot pray, I like to look up at it, and it recalls me in a moment ; that is how the Roman Catholics, ay, and the Anglican Catholics, use their crucifixes. I do not often uncover it, I cannot ; the expression of the physical torture, the strained disjointed limbs, the crowned helpless head, are too much for me : my only wonder is how any one can look at it with indifference and pass on, as I have seen them over and over again."

"You are peculiar in your opinions, you know." Barbara thought she was expected to say something, so this was the sole remark that fell from her ; Nest found it a little chilling, as she often did find Barbara's responses, so she said quietly that they must leave off talking and begin to dress, a proposition which restored Bab to good humour, for she had been a little ruffled over the splendours of the trinkets.

"Behold my nun of the robe *grise*," said Nest, with a little mocking laugh, as Bab escaped from her adorning hands. She ran and looked at herself, and clapped her hands with quite a shout of glee.

"Why, I look fit to go to a ball, Nest! why, Nest, what have you done?"

Barbara might well exclaim at the radiant little figure that answered back her smiles in the great pier-glass; she had, it is true, only got on the white dress that Hester had so thoughtfully sent after her, but Nest had wreathed her hair with maiden-hair fern and rose-coloured geranium, and had fixed a great spray of the same as a breast-knot! the natural green comb set off Barbara's brown hair and glowing healthy skin, and excitement had a little heightened her colour. Nigel stared not a little as she entered the drawing-room—this dainty lady was new to him. Barbara did not see his look, for the square shoulders of Norman Strath blocked up one window, and she had eyes for no one else; he turned round and greeted her with a well-pleased smile: "Have you had a happy day, Barbara?"

"Very, very happy," replied Barbara, with unmistakable emphasis; and then she proceeded to detail all the several pleasures she had enjoyed; the summons to the dinner-table interrupted her, but she had it her own way for a while.

But whether she talked, or whether she was silent, it was all alike novel and delightful. Hester was a careful house-keeper; though the board at Heathcote was abundantly provided, it was all of a plain homely kind. Barbara had never seen or tasted such delicacies as the small round table furnished—such entremets, such amber jellies, such candied fruits; and then the ferns, and the glitter, and the glass, and the strange sparkling wine drank out of those quaint old Venetian glasses: Nest, in her shimmering blue dress and long fair hair, making such a sweet little hostess, and St. Ronans so graceful and talkative. No wonder Bab's eyes got brilliant with excitement; no wonder she laughed and grew silent in a breath; no wonder Norman looked so cheerful, and told such racy anecdotes; it was the pleasantest dinner-table in the world. They got on politics presently, that debatable ground of all ages, and all dinner-time Nigel and Norman were at it furiously; there was no shadow of reason for Bab to interfere, she might have held her peace and said nothing, for men like women listeners—even better than women talkers—but Bab was not going to

be sensible, so she floundered among them in a moment, with as much grace and dexterity as the female sea-lion at the Zoological Gardens, when she walked on her fins and her tail, and upset all the flower-pots in the midst of her clammy progress. Of course she said everything wrong, and in the worst possible manner; but what did that matter, when she wore a comb of maiden-hair fern and looked almost pretty? neither of them quarrelled with her as when her hair was rough, so she played the political Spilkins with them and hooked up a king and a queen in a knowing manner before she left off.

"Barbara has contradicted every one, and herself, too, twenty times over, and Barbara is radiant," observed Nigel. "Mesdames and you, my bon cousin, let us consider the discussion ended, and adjourn to the terrace." And then they all went out.

They sat down after a while, and Nest ordered coffee.

It was a delicious evening; the lights from the open windows threw a gleam over the little party, and enabled them to see each other's faces, for outside there was only dim starlight, dark masses of foliage, and pale shadows on the lawn.

Barbara quoted poetry softly to Nest, the young men chatted together, and by and by there was a lull. Dr. Strath puffed slowly at the cigarette Nigel had handed him.

"I saw Sir Geoffrey Hunsden this evening, Barbara; he has been spending the afternoon at your house." Barbara gave a shrug, Nigel laughed.

"Poor fellow! I hope that match will never come off."

"I don't know one more likely; they say matches are made in heaven: what's your objection to this one?"

"On the ground of mutual disparity of taste. Barbara knows my ideas on that subject. Miss Heathcote will bore him to death."

"Humph, it is his own affair, I take it."

"Not a bit of it," returned the other briskly, "he is talked into it by his mother, and then he is in the clutches of a woman who is as strong-minded and determined as she is beautiful; it is suicidal on her part, but women are suicidal on principle. Sir Geoffrey is the gentlest fellow breathing, but three years of matrimony with the grey mare, and there'll be a coroner's inquest up at the Park—Hunsden Field, they ought to call it, rotten old place that it is—and they'll bring in a verdict and true bill of the case, 'Driven and hobby-horsed to death.'" They all laughed, and then Norman said:

"I don't see why you should pity Hunsden. A man is his own master, I suppose."

"Not when he lets himself be led in a leash like a greyhound, and that's what Sir Geoffrey does. He's managed by a parcel of women, and the young women are worse than the old ones. When they take to managing a fellow, if he be soft, like my friend Sir Geoffrey here, they do it with a twirl of their little finger. Miss Heathcote is not particularly skilful in the matter, so she hammers it home; but I should not be surprised if he turned out a rusty nail in the end."

"You are a bit of a philosopher, Nigel," said his cousin.

"I know human nature, and that is what you professional men don't always know; and I tell you this—we are among friends, I suppose—I am a nice observer, and from what I could see—and I saw a good deal more than people supposed—he is getting sick of the whole business."

Barbara caught her breath in a startled manner.

"You may be surprised, Barbara, but there, you're only a girl. Girls don't know anything about this sort of thing. I dare not trust you; but if any one—Norman, for example, might give her a friendly hint to amuse him a little more, and bore him a little less, or else—mark my words—he'll break loose from his traces one of these days."

"Let him," returned Barbara proudly. "No one wants him to marry Hester, he is not worth her little finger; he is nothing but a great good-natured ninny."

"Softly, softly, Barbara," interposed Norman gravely. "I don't think that is quite the way to speak of your future brother-in-law."

"He'll never be that," she said crossly.

"We're getting on odd topics to-night," said Dr. Strath. "Little Barbara, you are too sure about everything, and so is Nigel, too. See how big he was just now with his prognostications of evil."

"And they will be true, mark my words," repeated Nigel sententiously.

"Well, well, we shall see. Dr. Heathcote was at the gate with him as I passed, and they told me two bits of news. By the bye, the doctor said I was to take you home early, Barbara."

"Daddy may keep his advice to himself. I never catch cold. What else, Norman?"

"Oh! a message to you, Nest. Sir Geoffrey will send up the white pony he promised you to-morrow. He says you need not be afraid to try her, for she is as gentle as a lamb."

"He's a generous fellow. Nest is so timorous about horses; we have not one she dare ride."

"I only ride in the country," said Nest, *sotto voce*.

"Oh! every one knows that, *ma mie*. Well, I must say it is a good-natured action on Sir Geoffrey's part, and a very handsome gift into the bargain. He is a regular old English squire—open-handed—always ready to give. Why, it was only the other day he sent you that beautiful little Italian greyhound."

"He is very kind," murmured Nest.

"But you haven't seen him half a dozen times."

"Oh yes, Nie!"

"Well, not often."

"Perhaps not," she answered quietly. "He walks to church with us every Sunday, and I have seen him two or three times a week at Heathcote House, and he dined here once when you were ill."

"How was that?"

"Oh! didn't you know? I thought mamma told you; perhaps you have forgotten. Lady Hunsden sent us home in her carriage one wet Sunday, and Sir Geoffrey called afterwards with the dog, and mamma asked him to dine, because she was so dull of an evening without you, she said."

"Ah! I think I do remember hearing something about it. Fancy the Madre and Sir Geoffrey *tête-à-tête*. How hard up she must have been."

"Well, as none of you seem anxious to hear my news, I will shut up, as Leigh says, and take my departure. Barbara, it is really getting late, and they will expect you home. I should not be surprised if you were to find Sir Geoffrey Hunsden there now."

"Oh no! he never pays two visits on one day," replied Bab confidently; "but I shan't move an inch, Norman, till you've told us what you've got to say. It is something grave, I see."

"Dr. Heathcote said I might tell you, but I did not like to spoil your evening. Well, come down this shrubby walk, Barbara," he continued, in a lower tone; but Nigel overheard him.

"No, no—no private confidences; no shrubby paths; we are all to hear as well as Barbara. Out with it, Norman."

"My good fellow, it concerns Barbara more than it does the rest; but as I don't think she will be much surprised, I

may as well be quick about it, and tell you that Hester and Sir Geoffrey have made it up between them, and Hester is to be Lady Hunsden before next spring."

It was impossible for Nigel not to look crestfallen. He had to swallow his philosophy as best he could, and a long whistle of intense surprise was all his reply.

Barbara said: "Why did you not tell me before, Norman? I have got a blow," and she gasped as if she did not like it; and then, "It is all over with Essie, and she will marry and be unhappy ever after. It is a crazy, crazy world, St. Ronans," and then sat down.

"It is a world that marries and gives in marriage, my child," returned Dr. Strath kindly. "I don't see that you have anything to fear for your sister. Geoffrey Hunsden is a good man."

Barbara's answer surprised them all—it was a very frank burst of tears.

CHAPTER XXI.

BARBARA FORBIDS THE BANNIS.

"How hard it is for women to keep counsel!"

SHAKESPEARE.

THAT broke up the party.

Nigel leaned over her in a frightened sort of way, but Bab gave him a little push.

"When a person is rather overset and does a silly thing," said Bab, with hysterical dignity, "there is no reason why they should be suffocated," and then she gave a little laugh, "dear, oh dear, it is the maddest, most ridiculous old world that ever was—as mad as a March hare; and it has been such a happy day. Oh! please, take me home, somebody; for where's the good of anything?"

"Let me take you home, Barbarina," whispered Nigel coaxingly; but Dr. Strath quietly put him aside. "Come, Barbara," he said, and before she quite knew what he wanted she was standing under the chandelier in the drawing-room, and he was tying on her bonnet, which Nest had brought. "There," he continued, in much the same tone he might have employed to a fretful infant. "I think you are tidy now; never mind gloves in the country. Come along."

"What makes you in such a hurry?" replied Barbara, rather contradictorily. "There will be creases under my chin to-morrow. Good-bye. We shall never know such a happy day again." Nest shivered. "That will do, St. Ronans, you hurt me," and she withdrew her hand crossly from his grasp.

"Nothing pleases you to-night, Barbara," said Dr. Strath, smiling. "Not even to take my arm, I suppose." Bab took it without a word. They were in the fragrant dark lanes now. She would have liked to have put her head down on it and have her cry out. Ah! if she had.

Dr. Strath went on talking. He said a great many soothing things in a very kind voice. Bab listened to them all, and then at the last she said: "It is no use talking, there is only one thing I care to know, after all. Does Sir Geoffrey Hunsden love Hester, or does he not?"

Dr. Strath was silent.

"Silence gives consent. Do you mean yes, Norman?"

He gave an uneasy laugh. "Suppose you ask him that question, and not me."

"As if I don't know what that means," said Bab contemptuously. "Of course he doesn't. I have seen it twenty times over. He thinks her a fine woman, and fit to head his table, that's all; and do you imagine Hester loves him?"

"My dear Barbara, that is your sister's affair."

She gave a stamp. "I tell you no, most emphatically no. She is as sweet as sugar to him, and as cold as ice. And why she is marrying him nobody knows; but it is a wicked shame to let her do it."

"Barbara, do you know what you are saying?" There was a grave reproof in his voice.

"Don't be angry with me, Norman. I can't keep it all in: I am going to be very good presently."

"But you will make Hester very unhappy, now everything is settled."

"I—I shall never say a word to her, nor to Sir Geoffrey either."

"Come, that is right," he returned, in a tone of relief. "Well, have it out, it won't hurt me, or the hedges, to hear you."

"No, I cannot say anything more now at present. I have always quarrelled with Essie all my life long. We never get on a bit, and never shall; but I don't like feeling ashamed of her."

"You are putting it mildly, Barbara, upon my word."

"I am ashamed of her," repeated Barbara slowly, "disappointed, and sorry, and ashamed. It is not honest to marry a man you don't really love ; it is very little better than telling a lie. It is that that hurts me so."

What was Dr. Strath's answer to that ?—"Ah ! if only all were as good and brave as you."

"As me, Norman !" in an incredulous tone.

"Ay, as you, my child. You are faithful and true to your heart's core, Barbara." In after years she remembered those words. They parted at the little green gate in the wall. As it swung back there was a sweet smell of lilies in the air. The garden was dark and perfumy. A few stars shone overhead, and a great moth dashed against Barbara, leaving a trail of dew on her cheek.

Her wistful eyes spoke volumes ; but she only said "Good-night."

"Good-night," he returned. "You will be very good, Barbara ?"

"Yes, if I can," she replied, sighing. "When one is happy it is easy enough, but not now."

Barbara was very near forgetting her promise. When she opened the parlour door the old twinge came back again, and yet any stranger would have called it a very pleasant family party. There was a scent of fresh flowers, a space of soft shaded light ; somewhere in the dusk by the open windows Connie was playing low snatches of music, a waltz or two—a prelude to a song ; Leigh was asleep on the sofa ; the doctor reading in his great chair ; Hester working as usual, rather flushed and a little tremulous, and Geoffrey Hunsden near her with his handsome florid face set in a disc of light.

Barbara's entrance made a little stir. Connie looked round curiously, but strummed on ; the doctor took off his spectacles, while his paper fell with a crackling sound, which roused Leigh, who brought his sleepy face into view and yawned ; Sir Geoffrey stretched his legs a little more and looked sheepish. Barbara was aware they were all watching her. "I am a woman of my word," she thought, and then she went and kissed her father.

"You are late, little woman. Did not Norman tell you you were wanted ?"

Barbara nodded and gave her hand to Sir Geoffrey. "How do you do, Sir Geoffrey ?" she said, with a little emphasis, as

though he must be painfully conscious by this time of failing health ; and then she went round and kissed Hester. "I am a woman of my word," she repeated again to herself and sat down, and that was Bab's congratulation.

Connie played soft music ; Leigh stretched himself and went and stood by her. "It's awfully slow," Barbara could hear him say.

"Why, Bab, where are your manners ?" said Dr. Heathcote, pinching her cheek. "Has Norman told you the grand news ? Surely you are going to congratulate your sister."

"I hate congratulations," returned Barbara pettishly. "Every one knows that every one else wishes them happiness, and that sort of thing. Of course, I hope Essie will be happy ;" and then, with effort, as if she had suddenly remembered it, "and Sir Geoffrey too." No one could help laughing, though it was rather awkward and uncomfortable. Sir Geoffrey moved his legs uneasily, and grew rapidly hotter. Hester looked up reproachfully, and then, seeing her red eyes, grew mollified in a moment.

"I don't think that is quite well done, my little Bab," said Dr. Heathcote ; but Hester came to her relief.

"Barbara means well, father ; it is only her way."

"Of course, of course," repeated Barbara dreamily. Hester's hand was flashing in the lamp-light. There was a brilliant hoop of diamonds on one finger that shone like a mimic fire. Barbara sat and watched it as though it fascinated her ; then she looked up sharply at Sir Geoffrey Hunsden and caught him in the middle of a yawn. It was like an inspiration. It woke her up in a moment. "What a sleepy party," she said briskly. "Connie, why don't you play louder ? The lanes are full of glow-worms, Sir Geoffrey, they will startle your horse when you go home." Her voice had a friendly tone of interest in it. "Your mother goes to bed very early, does she not ?" A bright expression crossed Sir Geoffrey's face ; it was as though she had signed his release.

"I had no idea it was so late," he replied. "Doctor, why did you keep me ? Eleven o'clock ! Why, 'pon honour, Lady H.—my mother, I mean—will be wondering what can have become of me."

"Yes, I think you had better go, Geoffrey ; you will come again to-morrow." And Hester smiled full in his face.

Sir Geoffrey stopped, embarrassed. "Oh, of course, if you wish it, Hester—that is—I was—I had intended calling up at

St. Ronans—just a polite call, you know, but”—here his face lengthened—“I can come up here all the same afterwards, only——”

“I shall not expect you.” There was a little cloud on the brow of his betrothed, even Sir Geoffrey noticed it.

“Oh, of course I shall come,” he returned with lumbering tenderness, “you don’t suppose that I meant—that you—that I, I mean——”

“Oh, good gracious ! no,” interrupted Barbara, to her sister’s great relief, “we don’t expect anything. How can you disturb your mother’s peace of mind in this way ? Essie won’t be thanked for it, I can tell you.”

“What a girl you are, Barbara,” chuckled Sir Geoffrey, and then he straightened himself and stood erect ; he was a very fine-looking man when he held himself well, though he never showed to advantage in evening dress ; he looked far better in his high boots and rough tweed shooting-coat, but still there was something in his fresh good-humoured face with all his bearishness and *mauvaise honte* that made Barbara feel very sorry for him. A look of chagrin, an added heaviness, almost dullness, as though the day had held no special joy for him.

“Has it for Hester ?” thought Barbara, but she could not tell. Hester looked much as usual as she leisurely folded her work and bade adieu to her lover : “And tell your mother, Geoffrey, that we will all come to dinner on Thursday.”

“Whom do you mean by all, Hester ?” said Barbara, in alarm ; and her look added, “I hope you’ve not been accepting an invitation for me.”

Hester answered the look. “I could not help it,” she replied, rather apologetically ; but her manner seemed conscious, and Dr. Heathcote interfered.

“You are such a child for your age, Bab, that you never help anybody ; don’t you see that this dinner at Lady Hunsden’s is rather a ceremonial affair—an acknowledgment, in fact, of Hester as her son’s *fiancée* ? It is to be a family party, do you see, and we shall all go.”

“I don’t see why every one is to be victimised because Essie is engaged ; and every one knows I hate dinner-parties.”

“Oh, do go, Geoffrey,” said Hester, much displeased ; “we shall never end if Bab is going to begin one of her arguments.”

But the doctor detained him.

“Barbara, my child, you are acting selfishly and distressing your sister as usual. I thought better things of you. It is my

wish that you accept Lady Hunsden's invitation, and I hope you will tell Sir Geoffrey so before he goes."

"All right, doctor," interposed Sir Geoffrey. "I'll give my mother a pretty message from Barbara," for which good-natured speech Barbara could have blessed him.

"Now you're cross, Daddy," she said, when the so-called lovers had left the room.

"No, not cross—only sorry, Barbara."

"Then you're not to be sorry any longer, Dad," and Bab brushed her cheek against his grey beard. "Be quick and kiss me, and give me a good hug, and say you're sorry for being sorry, and all that, or I'll go and keep awake all night, and cry my eyes out."

"God bless my foolish Bab."

"Amen, Daddy."

Bab did not find her own solitary thoughts conducive to repose that night; first she began sobbing over them like a baby. "Oh! why was I so cross when I want to be good—and I a woman of my word?" And then it occurred to her that she had not been generous to Hester; "she'll be miserable enough with that stupid good Geoffrey without my making her more so," and thereupon her conscience began to prick her. "I think I'll go and say something more to her before I go to sleep."

It was very late, but women of their word don't stop to weigh actions, so Bab passed her astonished Cerberus, and began groping downstairs.

"How I hate darkness," she said, when she had rolled down two steps and bruised herself, and then she picked herself up and trundled on; it was too late to go back for a candle, so by dint of feeling walls, and bringing up her fingers sharp against door-handles, and knocking her head against a bracket or two, she managed to find the right door at last.

"Why, I declare they're both asleep," thought Bab; but a moment's survey in the dim light undeceived her; there was only one head—Connie's—on the pillow, but there was a heap of clothes at the foot that might mean something, so Bab guided herself by the bedpost and peeped round; it was all shapeless and undefined. Yes—no—surely there was a line of crouching shoulders; should she touch it?—no, it would startle Hester; she was only saying her prayers. Barbara stood doubtfully; should she stay and speak, or should she go back to her room? There was a stirring of drapery, a movement, then something

resembling a stifled sob. "Essie, I am here," whispered Barbara softly; she did not like to waken Connie, and even then Connie moved uneasily.

But there was no response, only two white arms gathered slowly above her head, and then fell forward, and then came a husky whisper: "What am I doing, Arthur? Arthur, why did not you save me?" The darkness, the strange movement, and the stranger words, almost curdled Barbara's blood.

"Essie, are you asleep? Get up, Essie." Hester rose in a moment.

"Good Heavens, Barbara! what is the matter? How you frightened me."

"Not more than you frightened me," returned Barbara, with her teeth chattering. "Were you dreaming, Essie, or were you saying your prayers?"

"People generally say their prayers when they kneel down, do they not?" returned Hester impatiently. "Be quick and tell me what you want; we are up dreadfully late."

"Yes; but don't be angry, Hester. I ought to tell you, ought I not? I heard you say something, you did not know I was near—but I ought to tell you——"

"Well, what a fuss you are making," but Hester's voice was not quite steady, "and goodness, how you are shaking, Barbara."

"I am so cold, and it is so dark, and you said such funny things, Hester," and Barbara repeated her words as well as her chattering teeth would allow her. "You did say that, Essie, I am sure."

"Did I?" returned Hester harshly. "Well, good-night." There was no evasion—no denial; all the Heathcotes scorned a lie: but Hester could have bitten out her tongue; her bosom rose and fell stormily.

"There, I knew you would be angry," cried Bab piteously, "but how could I help it? you will be quite safe with me, Hester; I'll never say a thing to any living soul."

"Can I trust you, Barbara?"

"Yes—yes," returned Barbara eagerly; was her sister going to give her her confidence? but Hester's next few words disappointed her; she did not speak for a moment, and then said:

"You will keep your promise, Bab?"

"Of course; if I say I will, I always keep my word."

"Then we shall say no more about it, and you are too

honourable to try and find out if I meant, or if I did not mean, anything by what I said. Yes, I do trust you fully and entirely; and now what did you want with me?"

Barbara tried to hide her disappointment.

"Oh nothing; that is, nothing in particular." Then recovering herself, "I only wanted to say that perhaps I was a little unkind this evening not to congratulate you more warmly, but——"

"Don't, Barbara, don't, I can't bear it." And Bab shrank back almost alarmed at the vehemence of her tone. "You at least are true, and can spare me this," and then her voice softened. "I understood you this evening, Barbara, and that is more than you did me. I saw you were sorry for me."

"Oh so sorry, so sorry," and, for the first time in her life, she threw herself into her sister's arms. "He is good, but not good enough for you, Essie; he will make you miserable."

"Hush, dear," replied Hester very tenderly, but she pressed Barbara to her warmly as she spoke; "you don't understand—you cannot—why I am marrying him; sometimes I hardly know myself. But my life is very hard and cold, and he is a good man; he will take care of me; I shall have greater chances for usefulness and work: it is so narrow here," and she shuddered; "he will make me happier."

"No, no," returned Barbara mournfully, "he will not do that; you are making the first great mistake of your life, Hester, and one day you will know it."

Something wet touched Barbara's face; there was a long silence; but, when she spoke, Hester's voice had a forced cheerfulness in it.

"Come, come, we must have no more of these forebodings, Barbara; why, there's Leigh looked as gloomy as possible all the evening. I can't think what has come over the boy; you must look after him, and brighten him up a little. I tell you what it is, Bab, we are all over-tired and excited; you must run away now, and get back into your warm bed, or you will be catching your death of cold."

"I don't want to go to sleep—not a bit, Essie."

"No, nor I, but we'll both try; there, say good-night, you poor tired child, and away with you."

"Good-night," said Barbara in a dreary voice; and she stumbled up to her den, and was asleep in a moment.

It was full sunshine when she awoke, and Connie was standing over her with a cup of coffee, and a face of mischievous glee.

"Good - morning, Barbara ; I hope you have had a good sleep."

Bab blinked drowsily.

"Why, what is the time, Con?"

"Time? Oh, it's only nine o'clock, and as fine a summer's morning as you can wish to see. There, drink your coffee, Barbara. Hester sent it with her love ; and father says will you be sure and go and see Mrs. Jackson this morning ; she lives in the first little white cottage you come to on Bex Hill, after you've passed the Blue Boar and Sam Tyler's smithy."

"Very well," answered Barbara rather indifferently, but she coloured up to the roots of her hair ; she had forgotten all about Mrs. Jackson."

As usual, her remorse took an irascible turn. Connie was tip-toeing inquisitively round the room, in her restless fashion, and was called to order in a moment.

"I wish you would go down, Connie, and not fidget about so."

"That's all the thanks I get for bringing you that nice hot coffee," returned Connie, slightly aggrieved.

"The coffee is very well," grumbled Barbara, "only too sweet ; not but what that is a good fault, Con, and thanks to you all the same." And then she got mollified and condescending in a minute, and expatiated a good deal on the benefit of early rising, and the necessity of setting a good example to the poor you are visiting by laying aside all unnecessary vanities, and only inciting them to perfect cleanliness and sobriety.

"'Cleanliness is next to godliness.' I wish you would find out that text, Con, it is somewhere in Romans or Corinthians, I think—there's my Bible—no, it's not dusty, a well-used Bible can't be ; just look it out while I dress. I like to arm myself with a useful text or two, and I think that is sure to come in first."

"I don't believe it's a text at all," pouted Connie, rather disgusted with her task. "Cleanliness is what, Barbara?"

"Next to godliness, dear—it's St. Paul all over. I declare I could almost put my finger on it without looking ; but when you make an assertion it is always well to quote chapter and verse, so look in Romans and Corinthians first, and after that you may try the lesser Epistles."

So Connie did as she was bid, and rummaged text by text, and chapter by chapter, but of course in vain. Barbara came by and by, and they did a great deal of searching, but after an hour they were forced to give it up.

"There, I told you it was not a text," cried Connie triumphantly; and Barbara, to her chagrin, was obliged to give in, so she turned her thoughts to matters of greater importance, viz. to set that same example of cleanliness and sobriety in her own person. It cost her a good deal of care and much searching in a chest of castaway raiments; but she was dressed presently, and standing out in the sunny lane, drawing on a pair of thread gloves with great complacency.

"I wish I could meet Miss Vokes," she said to herself. "I think she would own I understand my business, and am up to district work."

Now Miss Vokes was a sort of evangelical deaconess, one of those feminine right arms that clergymen are much given to depend upon—a cheerful loud-voiced spinster, who lived alone in a little red brick cottage in Sunningford; dressed in rather shabby finery, and whose heart was better than her head; she led a sort of Dorcas existence, was more of a charwoman than a lady visitor to her poor neighbours, would scrub their floors as well as read a chapter to them, stood sponsor to half the babies in the village, and was the terror of all drunkard husbands by the way she rated them when sober, feared no one, and minded no one but the doctor, to whom she was a parish factotum, working under his and Norman's orders as humbly as though she were some workhouse drudge. "So-and-so is dying; send for Miss Vokes," was quite an ordinary sentence in the mouths of both, and the number of death-beds she had attended, the dying eyes she had closed, was known only to those two men, who always spoke of her with such quiet reverence. Such was the nursing mother in Israel, to whom this babe and quondam beginner, Barbara, felt herself drawn to set an example, "For her plaid silks, her little bits of faded ribbon, her curls, and her finery, sicken one," said Puritan Barbara; and if she had met her, how Miss Vokes would have stared.

It was a glorious July day, and Bab wore a greasy old brown dress that had long been consigned to oblivion on account of neutral and conflicting tints, but it was of that special Quaker brown commonly called snuff-brown, and nothing else would suit Barbara; so she had pulled it out from under a pile of other things, much creased and rather fusty, and had arrayed her small form therein, with a certain pride in its shabbiness that was quite inexplicable. "It was a dear old gown," Bab thought, as she put it on, for it bore the traces of many past pleasures indelibly interwoven in its warp and woof. She had

worn it new one Christmas night, when they had snapdragon, and there in the front breadth was the small round hole that Leigh had burnt in it; there was the smear of ink too that reminded her of a pleasant evening at the Rectory, when Sydney Herbert had upset the inkstand over her, and she remembered how contrite he had been, and the fuss Mr. Herbert had made about it; but that was nothing to the paint splashes and the grease, every one of them bearing witness to pleasant winter mornings and winter nights, when they had roasted chestnuts at the fire, and made blackened toffee, while Barbara stood with the great sugary spoon, gravely basting her dress every time she ladled the contents.

And Connie had been solemnly looking out "Cleanliness next to godliness," while Barbara manipulated the greasy folds of the dear old dress which was to rebuke Miss Vokes' interminable plaids; but this was not all.

A small black shawl, which bore its age in its face, and most certainly belonged to Mrs. Gamp's grandmother, was well drawn over Bab's shoulders, and pinned as she had seen her old nurse do it, tightly over her chest; a garden hat completed her costume, and in every feature there was repressed but tremendous action—Miss Vokes was nothing to her. Bab longed secretly to meet Miss Vokes, and she did not; one never comes across the person one wants, that is one unerring axiom of natural philosophy, and there is another yet more certain, that one is sure to encounter the person one wants to avoid, and it was rather hard on Barbara, knowing him as she did, that she should meet Nigel Strath; Norman would not have been so bad, but Nigel—well, it was hard upon Barbara. It made her a little nervous, too, to see the cool stare with which he honoured her; it was pointed, to say the least of it, it was comprehensive also, it took in every grease spot, every faded breadth, every crease and mangle in a moment. She felt she hated him.

"Why, is it you, Barbara?" when well drawled out, as it was now, Barbara's name certainly had that sheep-bleating sound that she often attached to it—"is it really you, Barbara?"

"Yes, it is I, St. Ronans; how is Nest? quite well I hope—not tired from last night?" this very politely.

"Nest, oh she's all right; no, I forgot, she has a headache and is not down yet. Where are you going?" He had turned and was walking on with her, an attention she would gladly have dispensed with; he was walking slowly too, and the sun was hot; Bab's patience was at fever heat.

"I think I must say good-bye to you, St. Ronans ; you are dawdling too much for me. I have to go all the way to Bex Hill."

"And who lives at Bex Hill—may I ask?"

"Oh, a patient of Daddy's I am going to see, a Mrs. Jackson. I am not a district visitor—not exactly, I mean, but I shall be soon, so I am getting my hand in," and she eyed her gown complacently.

"Are you going out charing for Mrs. Jackson, Barbara?" It was very rude, but then Nigel always did say rude things, only he said them in such a fascinating manner that you could not be angry with him ; his manner took the edge off his words, blunted them in fact, but Barbara got rather sulky, and would not answer. There was latent mischief in Nigel's eyes, you could see the spirit of fun was too strong to be resisted, so he went on :

"Charwomen always make pincushions of themselves ; they generally have large families, have they not ? I always thought that charwomen, babies, and pins go together ; how they can talk, and scold their children as they do with their mouths full of them—pins, I mean—I can't think. Conjurors are nothing to them."

Barbara remained silent, she felt hot, and she wanted to hold up her heavy dress, it was trailing in the dust, but she did not dare attract his attention, so she kept her eyes fixed on the dim grey hedgerows, which a little time ago had been so fresh and clean, and hoped he would leave her in peace. But some hopes are fruitless.

"I have been thinking a great deal over that talk we had, Barbara." He looked full at her, so she was driven to unlock her lips.

"What talk?" she asked, rather ungraciously.

"About the harmony of our relations with our poorer neighbours, and the best means of attaining a wider influence over them ; I remember every word you said on the subject, Barbara."

"Do you?" she answered ; how intent she was on those hedgerows, there were some bits of straw sticking out of a blackberry-bush, and two sparrows were chirping and pecking at them.

"Your words were so perfectly just and true, they were clever, too, for a girl of your age : let me see, ladies were to mix with them, not tower above them, they were to impart to them some of the simple and cheaper elegancies of life, they

were to be encouraged to make their homes pretty as well as neat, their dress was to be becoming, not slovenly, fresh, and whole, and clean, and the special lady visitor who was to take the special cottage under her ministering guardianship was to teach them refinement and grace in her own person by living example, for 'cleanliness is next to——'

"Good-bye—good-bye," said Barbara hastily, and before he had divined her purpose, she was down a side lane, sweeping cart-loads of dust in her train; she could hear him laugh, yes, she was sure she could hear him laugh. "If I be ever such a goose again," cried Barbara. "Oh, how hot and heavy it is!"

She was on the brow of Bex Hill by this time, there was the Blue Boar with its creaking sign-board, and opposite it, the smithy, the sparks were flying off the anvil as she passed; "a blacksmith is all very well in winter time," thought Barbara, "but I should like to change trades with the season, be a hay-maker one part of the year and a reaper another. Dear—oh dear; and a district visitor never; whatever shall I say?" and then she lifted the latch of a little white gate, and tapped softly at a door, a voice cried "come in," and Barbara and the old brown dress went in, and then she felt helpless.

It was a small room, rather untidy at the present moment, and a young sickly-looking woman sat by the hearth, with a battered old pail beside her, trying to wash a solemn fat boy who stood beside her, bare-footed, in his stays, while two other children, similarly equipped, played with some tin soldiers in a corner. "Twelve o'clock in the day and not washed," was Barbara's comment, and she began to feel virtuous and like Miss Vokes. She went forward with an air.

"You are Mrs. Jackson, I believe, your husband works with Sam Tyler, the blacksmith; well, you don't know me—I am Dr. Heathcote's daughter," and Bab seated herself on the edge of a chair and unpinned her shawl.

"Dr. Heathcote's daughter, Miss!" and Bab saw the woman look her over in undisguised amazement. "If I may make so bold, you are never his eldest daughter, Miss Hester?"

"No, I am the second one—Barbara."

"Oh! that people call the clever Miss Heathcote. I have heard the doctor talk about you, Miss," which piece of intelligence somewhat astonished Barbara. "I suppose they call Hester the handsome Miss Heathcote—I wonder what Connie is." The woman seemed to guess her thoughts: she was a

poor sickly-looking body with strained bright eyes—"Handsome is as handsome does, Miss."

"Yes," said Barbara; "and why is that boy so dirty?" there was no analogy whatever, but she wished to make it appear that there was. "It is twelve o'clock," said Barbara, virtuously, "and the children are in their stays, and not washed, Mrs. Jackson—'cleanliness is next to ——'"

But Mrs. Jackson put her apron up to her eyes, and Barbara became remorseful.

"No one never complained of me when I was well, Miss; the children were as sweet and clean as a nut, and my master, he had his bit of dumpling or 'taters as ready as ready could be before this, but being took sick as I am, with fourteen children, and six of them dead and buried till the resurrection, it's hard lines, and I not able to rinse out a pinny for them."

Tears streamed down the hard furrowed face—Bab coughed a little sympathy. "Are you very ill, Mrs. Jackson?" she asked, with real feeling in her voice.

"'Deed and I am, Miss; I have got an internal tumour, the doctor tells me; many a better woman nor myself have pined of that, and died; and but for my master and the little ones, I wouldn't care, but who would mind them when I am gone?"

Barbara began to feel melancholy; here was an aspect of human misery presented to her, without any means of relieving it. "It is a howling wilderness," thought Bab, and she coughed again; coughing always relieved her. "We must all die one day," she said solemnly, and after that effort she turned her attention to the boy, who seemed to pass his time in trying to scramble up into his mother's lap and being mildly put down again.

"He's heavy, and he worrits," said the poor mother.

"What's his name?" asked Barbara, with languid dignity.

"Dan, Miss; but he calls himself Baby."

"Babby," rapidly enunciated the child, with another fretful climb and a roll.

"Let him come and sit on my lap," said Bab timidly; and at the invitation he hoisted himself up, his small coal-begrimed feet appearing first, and then his curly head. Once seated in her lap he began to be decidedly communicative, if not brilliant, and commenced conversation by profuse alterations in the pronunciation of his name, for it seemed to change the

vowels rapidly. It was not "Babby," it was "Bebe," then "Bibbie," presently "Babbie," lastly "Bubbie;" he stuck at Bubbie for a long while, and seemed to like it. Bab was delighted with him; he was dirty, but he filled both arms and hindered conversation; she had hopes that her visit would be triumphant after all, till he fell asleep, and Mrs. Jackson asked her to read to her, and then all Barbara's embarrassment returned.

"There was a young lady, Miss, as used to come and see me; her name was Miss Shepherd, and she did read beautiful," hinted Mrs. Jackson; "and when she finished the chapter she used to say, 'Now, Mrs. Jackson, let us draw an inference,' she said, and sometimes she drawed it just beautiful."

"An inference?" said Bab in perplexity.

"Yes, an inference; sometimes a prayer, a precept and a promise all bonded together—strings of pearls she called them—'My pearls, Mrs. Jackson,' and then she would put up a prayer."

"What sort of prayers?" asked Barbara, willing to prolong the conversation.

"Oh, church prayers sometimes, one or two collectives, but mostly she stemporised. Oh, she stemporised lovely to be sure. Ah, poor thing, she didn't last long; I see'd her before she died, poor lamb; she said to me, 'I am going to worship in another temple, Mrs. Jackson,' says she, 'and we'll meet maybe in the courts of the Gentiles.' She was always talking about the Jews was Miss Shepherd."

"What did she die of?" asked Barbara, somewhat awe-struck.

"Indigestion of the lungs, my dear young lady."

Barbara took refuge in her book.

She got on nicely after that, and read Balaam's history all through in a loud cheerful voice, which she thought was as good as large print to failing eyes. It woke Baby, as he plaintively remarked, "Oo woke Bobbie dear;" and it rather tried Mrs. Jackson; and afterwards, though with painful utterance and bashfulness, Barbara "put up a prayer," just picked out a collect or two, and then she jerked into her seat again, feeling she had done her duty.

"I must go now," she said sweetly, as she drew on the thread gloves.

"Yes, indeed, Miss, thank you kindly, and my duty to the doctor."

"I don't think Miss Vokes could have done it better," she thought, as she retraced her steps; "but I fear I've made a mistake with my brown dress."

CHAPTER XXII.

AT ODDS.

"A face that should content me wondrous well,
Should not be fair, but lovely to behold,
With gladsome cheer, all grief for to expel;
With sober looks, so would I that it should
Speak without words, such words as none can tell."

SIR T. WYATT.

"A woman is more considerate in affairs of love than a man; because love is more the study and business of her life."

WASHINGTON IRVING.

EVERY one agreed that the dinner-party at Hunsden Park passed off very fairly; there were no strangers invited, and the only friends present were Doctor and Mrs. Strath. Sir Geoffrey, it is true, made some slight effort to include the St. Ronans' people, but his mother had the good sense to strenuously oppose this plan. "We owe it to Hester, Geoffrey, to make it strictly a family party; you must remember her position, my dear, and your own too;" and though Sir Geoffrey was a little sulky he was obliged to give in, and so every one agreed the evening was a success, Connie especially, who had a new dress for the occasion, and had never been at a dinner-party in her life before.

Barbara alone was silent. "The world is madder than I thought it," she muttered to herself when the Park gates had closed upon them; "there are some few people in it that ought to be shut up in Bedlam—our worthy host for example;" and then she and the stars had a long confab together. For Barbara had noticed a great many things; her bright eyes had peered out of a corner half the evening, where she had sat hidden like a hunted mouse, and when spoken to by Norman or Leigh her manner had seemed a little ruffled. "Why can't a person be left alone occasionally?" she had remarked rather peevishly to the latter, when he essayed some lively speech; "I am doing a difficult sum," she afterwards volunteered to Norman; "mine is a good head for arithmetic; I am trying to subtract a greater number from a less, and there is no re-

mainder, plus nothing, Norman, not even a fraction, so I must rub it out and commence afresh. I will begin with nought one this time and carry nothing—not even brains.”

And Norman said, “Let me feel your pulse, Barbara, for I think you must be a little feverish.”

“As mad as a March hare,” replied she frankly; “I can recommend you a patient for a strait-waistcoat, Dr. Strath. How flippant Leigh is to-night, very flippant; his jokes are not good, but he looks handsome, and good looks weigh heavier than cleverness; do you know my favourite song, Norman, ‘The Maniac?’ It is a horrible song, and used to frighten me. Connie must sing it; she hasn’t at all a good voice, and can’t sing that song in particular. Connie, will you sing ‘The Maniac’ for Norman?”

Connie came up in a rose-coloured flutter with white shining shoulders; she shrugged one daintily at Barbara.

“I am going to sing ‘The Wanderer;’ you are so fond of that, Bab.”

“If you don’t sing ‘The Maniac’ I won’t hear any other; go away. ‘I see her dancing in the halls.’ Oh, it makes your flesh creep. I don’t know whether I like that or the ‘Last Man’ best. Fancy being the last man, Norman—so cheerful, you know. I wonder if he had a dog—Tobias had a dog.” She seemed inclined to continue, but remained silent and meditative, and then she went over to Sir Geoffrey.

Sir Geoffrey had not seemed quite himself this evening; he made a capital host in general, frank, hospitable, and chatty in his heavy way; but to-night he looked harassed, a little distrait—what Nigel would have termed “bored.”

He was bored, there was no doubt of that. Hester sat beside him all the evening, looking beautiful in her fresh crisp silk. She was a little pale—a little silent, but so gracious, she seemed to unbend her dignity every time she spoke to him; never had she been so benignant and condescending. She was his for life, this grand-looking woman, this fair-haired Hester, with her smooth tongue and her pleasant ways; he had honestly wooed her after his lights, but his winnings seemed tedious to him. She would sit opposite to him day after day in graceful raiment—he knew that now, but what was he to say to her? She would take his mother’s place—this homely woman’s place whom he had so loved and revered, and rule his house—she would be his wife, to whom he was to cleave; his very thoughts were hers, but yet how was he to speak to her of the things

that lay nearest his heart? She had called his sports trivial; she would weary him with her charities, her endless dictums, and loving lectures. In spite of her beauty, which to do him justice had once attracted him, he had learnt to fear more than to love her; but for his sense of honour, which was ruggedly strong, and his fear of disappointing his mother, he would have said to her, "Hester, our agreement was a mistake, a man cannot answer for himself for years, it is all wrong, we do not love each other."

I think such a noble frankness would have won her esteem, a passing humiliation, and then they would have been friends for life; but he never got himself to say this, and at length his coolness and indifference began to alarm his mother. She had a long talk with Hester, and induced her to yield up her part of the compact. After all, what reason was there to wait? She was eight-and-twenty, and her life was dull to her. She liked him better now. So one day Sir Geoffrey found his long wooing over; the prize was ready for his hand; there was nothing to do but to take it. And so it came to pass that something that was very like hope—something that lay in a secret corner in the man's heart like a healing lily leaf—withered and shrank away from that moment. Barbara saw the brooding sadness on his face, and was sorry for him.—"If I could help you I would," she said to herself, "for you've always been good-natured to Barbara. I think I'll bring in a bill of lunacy against you—did it when of unsound mind. I wish Hester wouldn't look so like an image. Her head nods at intervals like my Mandarin, and a stereotyped smile," added Bab, with increasing irritation, "is an abomination;" and then she got herself into a corner by Sir Geoffrey. Sir Geoffrey looked very pleased to see her. He liked Barbara—all the men did, only she did not know it, and sometimes they did not themselves. "Bab Heathcote's no beauty, but she's bright," was often said of her; but women did not get on with Barbara at all. Geoffrey was pleased to see her, and made room for her with much cunning. "My mother's beckoning to you, Hester," he said, and then he and Bab had it all to themselves.

"Geoffrey,—I suppose I am to call you Geoffrey now,—you don't look a bit happy. Bridegrooms elect ought to be happy. You are making a mistake, you are not going to be hung."

"I feel precious like it," was his inward comment. "How ought a fellow to look?" he said aloud.

"I never was in the position," answered Barbara confidentially. "But between you and me, Geoffrey, I think they ought to look cheerful, which you don't. By the bye, I expected to see Nest here to-night."

It was a daring shot, but it hit. Geoffrey's face got burning, like a girl's—only a man's blushes are not so becoming.

"I was up at St. Ronans yesterday," he remarked, in a shamefaced manner. "Miss Strath wanted to try her pony, and her mother asked me to be there. We had quite a long ride together."

"Oh!" said Barbara; but she waited for him to go on.

"I don't think she much liked my riding with her at first. She's sensitive about her figure, poor little thing; but with her long hair no one would notice it. She got on capitally, though Bolt was a bit fiery."

"She is dreadfully morbid," returned Barbara meditatively. "Her mother has made her so, I believe. She thinks herself worse than she really is."

"Yes, that is just it," answered Geoffrey with animation. "She is slightly deformed, of course. No man in his senses would deny that; but who would notice it with her face?"

"With her face! Why, she is rather plain, is she not?—at least everybody says so."

"Plain! not a bit of it. The thing is, when one is with her one never thinks what she is."

"That's rather vague, isn't it?" observed Barbara, with assumed simplicity.

"Vague, is it? Well, I don't know. She often reminds me, when I look at her in church, of one of those saints one sees in the picture books. She is a saint I believe, only her goodness is not of the heavy sort. I can't fancy her lecturing a man now. Can you?"

"No. I don't think Nest's much of a virago," replied Barbara, and then she laughed heartily; but Geoffrey did not join her.

"And she likes horses?"

"Humph!" observed Barbara, gravely debating the question. "Yes, I believe she does."

"And dogs?" he hazarded, more timidly.

Barbara brought this question also to the test of memory, and then nodded ungraciously.

"And she is sensible, 'pon honour. She does not think a

man wastes his time who is fond of shooting and hunting and all that sort of thing. I have heard her say so over and over again."

A sudden gleam shot out of Barbara's eyes.

"That is a pretty thing Connie is singing. What a cracked voice the child has! I wish it were 'The Maniac' though, that's a fine song—"I see her dancing in the hall, I see her, I see her," and she hummed a snatch and broke off.

"Nest would not dance," observed Geoffrey gravely, "and with her figure one would not ask her. The saints didn't dance, did they, Barbara?"

Bab turned a little cross. "We've left off talking about Nest long ago, Geoffrey."

"Oh! Have we?" returned Geoffrey helplessly, and then he fidgeted. "I thought you were fond of your friend, Barbara?"

"Well, so I am," she returned, in an aggravated voice. "Dear, how tiresome you are, and so provoking. Of course, she's just the dearest little creature in the world, and all that, and looks nicer than Ruth Canham with all her beauty: and if I were to choose Leigh a wife to-morrow, I should fix on her, only Leigh wouldn't like a crooked wife."

"What's that you are talking about?" said Leigh, striding towards them with a frightened air.

"Oh, nothing," answered Barbara readily. "You are very flippant this evening, dear—terribly flippant. I must take you in hand presently."

"And find me a good wife, I suppose?" he returned with a meaning sneer.

"Yes, if you've not fixed on one already," laughed Barbara. "Ah! ah!" and she laughed till the tears ran down her face. It was such a capital joke, only no one seemed to see it.

Leigh's face darkened and then grew dreadfully pale. "Take care what you are about, Barbara," he said angrily. Then, cooling down but with much haughtiness, "Your tongue will bring you into trouble if you make me and my affairs the subject of conversation with your friends," and he turned away and walked to the window.

Barbara was quite stunned. "What does he mean?" she cried, in a frightened tone. "What have I said to make him go off like that?"

"He is in one of his tantrums, I suppose," answered Geoffrey. He was a little amused, but he struck his hands

together in a puzzled way. Bab turned from him with a gesture of impatience.

"Why, Leigh, you foolish Leigh!" she called out cheerfully; "come here to Barbara, sir."

But he did not come. So she followed him. "Why, Gyp," she said, very piteously, "you're never cross with Dame Muffet." They were standing together outside the open window now, the cool night air blew upon their faces. He looked very pale still, very unlike Leigh; but soon he seemed to recover himself.

"What was that you were telling Geoffrey about to-morrow, Barbara?" and his tone was so fierce that she shrank from him.

"About to-morrow!" she returned, in a bewildered voice.

"Ay," he repeated impatiently, "something about a wife and to-morrow. Who were you talking about, Barbara?"

She burst into a laugh. "Why, about Nest. Oh, you foolish fellow! I only said you would not like a crooked wife."

"Pshaw! what nonsense. Was that all?" but his tone was full of relief.

"Of course it was. Whom did you think I meant, dear? It was only a silly jest of mine to silence Geoffrey, he was so stupid."

"True, what an ass I've been; there, don't think any more about it, Barbara."

"And you are not angry with me, Gyp—you are sure you are not angry?"

"Nonsense," he repeated again—but this time with a relenting kiss. "There, run away, Barbara, or Hunsden will think we are mad."

So Barbara went back into her corner, but she felt spiritless and uncomfortable; she was tired, too; and it was quite a relief when Hester made the signal for a move. Leigh was not with them when they walked home, he was smoking a cigar with Geoffrey; but while Barbara was sitting up in her window-seat, having her confab with the stars, she heard his whistle at the foot of the stairs, and flew to open the door.

"Oh, is that you, Leigh?—have you come to wish me good-night?"

"Yes—no; I can't stay, Barbara, I only wanted to say good-bye, because I shall be off early in the morning."

"Early in the morning!—why, not before I am down, surely?"

"Yes, hours before. Rolf and I are going to have a day's fishing. Why, I told you a week ago, Bab; we take the train to Crowley, and then walk on to Englemere."

"But the fishing is not near so good at Englemere as at Lynn Hollow, Leigh; Norman said so, and so did——"

"Well, never mind what Norman says," returned Leigh impatiently. "Dr. Strath is not everybody's oracle, though you seem to think so; well, good-bye. What shall you do with yourself to-morrow, Bab? Go to St. Ronans, as usual?"

"Yes; and in the afternoon I shall walk over to Dort's Mill."

"Dort's Mill!" said Leigh, in a startled way, "are you going there to-morrow, Barbara?"

"Why not—I have not been there for an age, have I?"

"But it is so hot," he stammered; "so hot and so dusty; better wait a day or two till the weather is cooler."

"Oh, nonsense," said Barbara, "what rubbish you talk, Leigh—as if I cared whether the day is hot or not!"

"But you ought to care," he returned peremptorily; "it is very bad for your health, and your complexion, too," but seeing Bab's derisive smile he stopped.

"Have you got any more objections?" she asked merrily.

"Some one told me," he continued, hesitating, "that is—I think—I heard—was it Rolf?—yes, it must have been Rolf—that Ruth—Miss Canham, I mean, was going out for a day's holiday."

"Oh, that's different," observed Barbara quickly. "Why did you not tell me so before?"

"Well, I tell you now; so good-night."

"Good-night, Leigh." She kissed him and was turning away, but he stopped her.

"I am sorry I was cross to you this evening, Bab."

"So am I, Gyp, but never mind."

"Oh, but I do; you are such a dear little soul; you know, Barbara, that I would not hurt you for the world." There was a break in his voice that made her look up, and then she saw there were tears in his eyes; tears in Gypsy Leigh's eyes!

"Oh, Leigh, my darling!" and Bab clung to him.

"Good-night, Bab; there, don't strangle me. Gyp's a sad fellow, but he'll never grieve Babchen again if he can help it—never again."

The next afternoon Bab started for a walk. She set out for the fir-plantations, as usual, but as soon as she caught

sight of their green gloom, she turned her back on them, and went as fast as her hoppety trot would carry her, straight to Dort's Mill. She had argued herself round to this contrary proceeding in a way peculiar to herself, till she had satisfactorily adduced three very good reasons for so doing. They were very good reasons—quite admirable. Reason the first—it was a very hot day, an intensely hot day—scorching and shadeless, therefore a walk through the white dusty roads would be pleasant, to say the least of it; secondly, Leigh had pronounced on hearsay that Ruth Canham would not be at home. You should believe only half you hear, therefore it was clearly a duty to convince him that he ought not to be so credulous. Lastly, even though she should find out he was right, she would still attain her chief purpose, and have her own way.

"There is nothing like possessing good sense," thought Barbara, as she plodded along. "Dear! I wish my feet would not look so like a miller's. How hot it is, Ben, and I am so thirsty."

Ben lurched along, with his bushy tail in the air and his tongue lolling out very much on one side; he did not seem to enjoy his walk any more than his mistress did, and so draggled and feverish was his aspect—rather rollicking, too, that Bab's mind recurred to dog-days and hydrophobia in a most pleasing way, and she steadily refused to proceed till Ben had descended into the miry ways of a half-dried pool, and helped himself liberally to some of its stagnant contents. She was rather relieved after that, and gathered herself a hazel switch to drive away the flies; they were assiduous in their attentions this afternoon, and then they went on; she had ceased trotting, however, long ago, and had degenerated into a walk; by and by it became a drag, then a drawl, it would have matched Nigel's any day, only Nigel's languid drawl was easy and graceful and Bab's was not, it was more like a slow roll than anything else. It was quite a relief when they came in sight of the half-baked gardens of the Mill; Ben was among the French beans and cabbages in a moment, but Bab called him back. No one responded to her knock, so they went in.

The great kitchen was empty and fresh and cool, so Bab sat down on a settle and rested herself; there were voices in the outhouse, but she was far too tired to go in search of them. "By and by" and "presently" she said, and then she nearly went to sleep.

The little orchard looked sunny and green as usual, but the cows had left it, and taken refuge in cooler quarters; the side garden round the house flamed with carnations and great patches of nasturtium; there were grey spaces of lavender, too, and bunches of sweet-peas; inside the kitchen was a faint smell of spicy clove pinks. "Ah, ah," Barbara could hear in the distance in Paul Hillyard's voice. Reuben crawled in on his hands and knees in hot pursuit of a black beetle; "Bebe—bebe"—he gurgled out, and rolled at Barbara's feet like a fat puppy.

Bab picked him up, tucking him under her arm like a parcel, and went out, Ben leaping up after her with demonstrations of joy. Winnie met them on the threshold, and said "Peep-bo—and a bear, Lisha's big black bear," and went and hid herself. Bebe kicked up his legs under Barbara's arm, and howled in unison. "A noisy party," remarked Barbara placidly, and put him down.

In the cool outer kitchen Naomi was ironing out white piles of linen, in the midst of flowering plants; the low broad lattice, wide open, looked out on a square stone yard and cowhouse. There was a sweet milky smell, a crumpled white head showed itself, and a moist black mouth slobbered through a little green gate in the distance; some pigeons fluttered and pecked at the stone-crop; inside there was shade, red tiles, and fresh-scoured tins. "Ah, how nice and cool it looks," cried Barbara, with a long-drawn sigh of relief.

Paul Hillyard rose from his wicker-chair, and offered it to Barbara. He had checked shirt sleeves, an open waistcoat, and a fresh-coloured face, his light hair curled over his head like a baby's, and he had large blue eyes. Barbara admired him more than she did Sir Geoffrey Hunsden.

"May I sit down?" she said, and looked at him with an approving nod.

"Ay, just there," and Naomi paused in her ironing. "My master will fetch you some cider. Paul, some cider for the young lady; she looks dead beat and no wonder."

"The sun has rare power," added Paul. "Is that your dog, Miss Heathcote? Even the brute beasts feel the weather, you see; my cows there can't eat, poor things. I'll give him some water," he continued, for Ben, with more freedom than good manners, was burrowing in a large earthen jar, while a very small kitten, quite an imp of a thing, was up on end with excitement at the restless wagging of his tail.

Ben obeyed the whistle, and the kitten sat up and spat at

him with fury as he darted past her, and then followed him, gingerly licking her paws at intervals, as kittens will; the laws of continual movement seemed to puzzle her; she settled herself on a wheelbarrow and watched him, and every time he left off drinking she spat at him, and growled from her inside, and then went on licking herself pleasantly. Ben found her capricious, and turned his attention to the pigeons, but they wheeled off with a great clatter and left him; never was dog left so long without amusement; so he became inquisitive about a snail, and then stretched himself out on the flags and went to sleep.

Winnie came out from behind the eight-day clock and minced terribly, she wanted to assert her own individuality. "They cocks and hens have gone out walking," said Winnie—she seemed disposed for an argument—"and they 'ittle uns have yellow coats like Winnie's best, only Winnie has no flappers."

"Bebe-bebe," roared Reuben lustily.

Naomi took him up and placed him amongst the flower-pots; and then she silenced Winnie. "Little gurls mustn't talk; little gurls as talk ain't good little gurls."

"Don't the cocks and hens go to heaven?" says Winnie.

"Hear her!" exclaimed Naomi, with a sort of proud despair. "Children will talk, and there's no stopping them; Paul there doesn't know how to put off her questions—do you, Paul?"

"Nay; Winnie has a rare tongue of her own," answered Paul, as he patted Winnie's head fondly.

"The 'ittle black bantam has died," quoth Winnie, "and pussie ate the 'ittle yellow un. Are they both gone to heaven, and what do they do with their bones?"

"If little gurls talk, mammie will put them in the corner," said Naomi solemnly; "and they can't have the pie-crust cake with the currants in it, that they were going to have for tea."

Winnie stopped, startled with this view of the subject. She weighed the material against the spiritual, and found herself hungry. "Are there many currants in it, mammie?"

"A power of 'em," said Paul, winking at Barbara.

"Then I don't care for oo, cocks and hens," nodded Winnie, running to her father; "Winnie thinks oo 'tupid. Where's the black bears, feyther, as mocked and ate up all the 'ittle uns?" asked Winnie gravely, and then she buried her head in her father's coat.

"That is the worst of children," remarked Barbara candidly; "they hinder conversation. Where is Ruth?" She was afraid Leigh was right after all; so she began to feel cross.

"Ruth has gone to Crowley, Miss Heathcote."

"To Crowley!" and Barbara stopped in great astonishment. Leigh had gone to Crowley, too. What a coincidence!

Naomi put her iron against her cheek, and nodded smiling. "Ay, to Crowley; Ruth has a friend there, a dressmaker, who lives in a little street leading off High Street, afore you come to the church. She works for the vicar's daughters, does Miss Monmouth; but they do say that the vicar himself is going blind, and that he'll be—be what, Paul?"

"Nay; I never minded what Kitty Monmouth said."

"Superannuated," suggested Barbara mildly.

"Ay, that's the word; my head gets tiresome of times over words, since Reuben was born. Paul does not like Kitty Monmouth," she continued meditatively; "he thinks her a queer friend for our Ruth."

"So I do," repeated Paul vigorously; "Kitty is nought but a freakish sort of a creature, with her head packed full of rubbish; she ain't Ruth's sort, no, that she ain't—a bit saucy girl like that."

Paul Hillyard knocked the ashes out of his pipe-bowl; his brow looked stormy. Barbara glanced from one to the other, she guessed that there had been words that morning over Ruth's little holiday.

"If she must have a junket, or a spree, or whatever they call 'em in these parts, why couldn't the lass have bided a bit softly, and gone with us to Dairymead?—that's my wife's old home, Miss Heathcote; it has gotten into goodish hands now, and often I put the old mare in her traces, and take the women folks and the bit children over to the old place. When first she came here Ruth was always for going; 'Ah, do let us go and see dear Dairymead, Paul,' she used to say; and, howsoever inconvenient it might be, Naomi and I always made a push forward to please her. Didn't we, missis?"

"Ay, Paul," answered Naomi sadly; "but that was before Ruth was so changed."

"Changed?" cried Barbara eagerly.

But Naomi looked at her husband doubtfully before she answered. "This young lady is fond of our Ruth, Paul," she said; "she often comes to see her here, and at the village school, too."

Paul took his pipe out of his mouth—it was empty and guileless of smoke—and struck his hand on the table. "She has saved our Winnie, wife, and that's more to the purpose;

Miss Heathcote, I'm not a man of words—no Hillyard is—but father and son, they've known their duty, and when I forget what you've done for my little girl, may I be—.” He stopped himself, brought his hand down on the table, and went on trying to smoke.

Bab bowed benignantly—if people would magnify her little offices, what was she to do? No one had thought her a heroine at home, only Bab; but had she not saved two lives, Winnie's and St. Ronans'? At least did they not say that she had? and what had Miss Vokes done to compare with that? Here, at Dort's Mill, she was considered in the light of a benefactor; they showed her confidence, and treated her as a friend of years. Naomi and she had had long talks together, and she knew all about Dairymead and Ruth's lovers. She wished Hester, or even Miss Vokes could see her now. Naomi wiped her eyes—as she always did at this allusion—and then she put another iron to heat while she sorted the contents of a great basket.

Barbara watched her with interest. “How is Ruth changed?” she asked again.

“It's many and many a week since I saw it first,” said Naomi mournfully; “don't let Winnie touch the irons, Paul. We thought it was the school that tired her, and begged and begged of her, till we were moidered, to give it up; but she wouldn't hear of it. ‘If I don't have occupation I shall go mad,’ she said to me once, and there was such a worried look on her face as she said it; and then she was for having more work and more work; she was always at her needle for the children, or visiting the sick, and sitting up with them; and if she were ever so tired and wan-looking she wouldn't miss her evening walk—no, not for anything. I wanted her to give that up, too, for people got talking about it—folks will, you know; they can't understand such a pure natural creature as our Ruth—and Paul, there, he wanted to go with her just for protection like, and to make 'em hold their tongues, but she wouldn't let him; and when we pressed her, my master especially, she flamed up scarlet, and went and shut herself up in her own room, and wouldn't have any walk, and cried her eyes out. That was the night, Paul, when we heard those footsteps on the gravel walk outside that nearly skeered her into a fit.”

“Yes,” said Paul gravely; “but I couldn't make out Ruth at all that night, no how.”

“No; I know you didn't. He was angry with her and me; he said I spoilt her and made her fanciful and contrary.

Men don't understand the windings of such natures as Ruth's, and then they flare out and get violent, and then it's all up."

"Ruth bears no malice," said Barbara smiling; "she always speaks of Paul as being a kind brother to her."

"Ay; he's that and more than that——" answered Naomi; but Paul stopped her.

"And I'll be that to the end of time, howsoe'er she tried me. Miss Heathcote, you are our own Winnie's preserver, and Ruth's friend. I can say to you what I would to no other, and think it safe—not but what it's well known to the neighbours that I courted Ruth before I did my missus here."

"Paul, Paul!" and there was such a rush of colour over the poor sickly face.

"Eh, wife, and what's harm in that? Ne'er a man marries his first love they say; would you believe it, Miss Heathcote?" he continued, with the frank simplicity that seemed natural to him, "that when they were girls together, and I the miller's lad round the corner, that my wife was the handsomer of the two?"

"Oh no, Paul, never," exclaimed Naomi.

"Yes, she was," he persisted, "and the beauty of the village; there were more than one that would have married her then, but she caught that cussed smallpox nursing a friend that afterwards behaved ungrateful to her, and she nearly died of it, too."

"Ay, that I did," returned Naomi, sighing; "but when I saw the changed looks of some who had been my friends, and the pity of others, it was hard to be thankful for my spared life. I remember when I first saw my poor scarred face, Ruth had much ado to comfort me; I wished I had died then, Miss Heathcote."

"I was courting Ruth then," continued Paul, with a proud humility; "she was always a hard one to her suitors—carried her head high; in fact, almost as though she wanted to be made a lady. A farmer's daughter can marry any one, I heard her say once, and never all the years I followed her, could I get so much as a smile, or thank you. It was always, 'You are a good man, Paul Hillyard, but I will not marry you.'"

"And you gave it up after a time, I suppose," observed Barbara; she felt she was called upon to say something in answer to this strange confidence, but her look showed more interest than her words.

"A man can't go on for ever," said Paul sadly; "Naomi favoured me, and so I married her."

"But he always liked Ruth the best," sighed Naomi.

Barbara faced round upon her with astonishment. She understood now the placid sadness that was always expressed on Naomi's face, but the blue eyes looked trustingly and proudly for all that on handsome Paul Hillyard.

"Ah, but it was long before you cared for Naomi," she went on.

"Ay, but I wouldn't change her now for a dozen Ruths. Nay, never look so startled, wench, you knew that before."

"I was not sure of it, Paul," she whispered, and with that bright flush who would have called Naomi plain? She took up Reuben presently, and rocked him in her arms, with her eyes full of happy tears. Barbara sat and meditated.

"There must be something on Ruth's mind," she began at length.

Paul laid his pipe down, and looked triumphantly round.

"There's nothing like a woman for helping one after all; they beat men, and there's no denying that. Miss Heathcote, you have said the right thing; there must be something on her mind."

"But what?" mused Barbara, still aloud, "that is the question."

"True, Miss Heathcote—you mind her, Naomi—but what? that is the question."

"Some one must ask her," returned Barbara, in the same solemn manner; "Naomi, it must be you."

"Naomi, it must be you," repeated Paul placidly.

"No, no," returned his wife, much distressed, "Ruth puts me off with a laugh or a caress; there is no getting at her when she is in one of her moods; no, nor it mustn't be you, Paul; why shouldn't Miss Heathcote do it? Ruth is fond of her."

"I always said you were clever, Naomi," said her husband proudly; "cleverness is better than handsomeness any day. Yes, Miss Heathcote can ask her."

"So I will," replied Barbara complacently, and so they settled it.

There was not much conversation after that, for Winnie, who had been playing Joseph in the Pit, with four fingers and her father's buttonhole, and the thumb standing up for the Ishmaelitish merchant, suddenly became talkative, if not rampant; and as the cocks and hens had returned home from their perambulations on a neighbouring dust-heap, Barbara was con-

ducted forth in triumph to see the speckled hen, and the pigeons that were ladies, and wore ruffs round their necks. Bebe crawled out after them ; whereupon the kitten became fantastic, and made overtures to him from the extreme edge of the wheelbarrow, comporting herself generally like a crazy acrobat ; a wheezy puppy made his appearance also from under a water-butt, and considered that he had found his mother—rather a seedy-looking terrier—in Ben ; Ben smelt him disdainfully, and overset him with his paw in a moment, where he lay howling foolishly ; there were odd woody sounds of horns striking bluntly on the little gate. Barbara went out and fed the milky mothers with sweet wisps of hay, and then she thought of ox-eyed Juno and Ruth.

Naomi was setting out the tea-table in the big kitchen ; the kettle was gossiping sociably in the outer premises, where there was a smell of freshly-dried clothes.

“You must stay with us till sundown,” Paul had said, and Barbara had cheerfully assented.

“That’s Adam, and that’s Eve,” remarked Winnie. “Adam has a red bib, you see, and a rainbow of feathers on his tail, and he always crows when they hens lay an egg.”

“The child’s knowledge is Biblical almost to profanity,” thought Bab. Winnie chatted on :

“They ladies with the ruffs coo and eat up all the sweet corn ; Snow and Dapple have wet mouths ; and the puppy and Bebe won’t go to heaven.”

“Good gracious, Winnie !”

“Bebe dirties his pinny, and walks like the serpent, and the puppy won’t eat Winnie’s crusts.” She looked up at the blue sky reflectively.

“When Winnie’s an angel,” she said, “Winnie will have yellow flappers ;” and then they went in. Barbara enjoyed her tea very much ; she thought it better even than Mrs. Strath’s ; she had never drunk out of such gaudy teacups before ; and it was such a surprise too, when she had emptied hers, to find a parrot in full plumage, red and green, at the bottom. Winnie chirped and said, “Oh a Sunday Dickie,” when she saw hers. Bebe put his red shoes on the table, and held out his moist crust to Barbara with a loving smile ; he and Winnie wanted to feed her with all their crusts.

Barbara thought it all excellent fun ; the pie-crust cakes were delicious, and so was the hard yellow butter and the honey.

"I've never enjoyed myself more," she said, when she took leave ; "tell Ruth I shall come up and see her in a day or two."

"Come up to-morrow," said Naomi ; "Paul is going to market, and I shall be out for an hour or two in the evening."

"Very well," answered Barbara, and then she went home.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES."

"Yet was there light around her brow,
A holiness in those dark eyes,
Which show'd, though wand'ring earthward now,
Her spirit's home was in the skies.
Yes ; for a spirit pure as hers
Is always pure, e'en while it errs ;
As sunshine, broken in the rill,
Though turned astray, is sunshine still !"

T. MOORE.

THERE is nothing like experience for teaching people wisdom ; this time Barbara put off her walk till sundown.

The evening was far advanced when she arrived at the mill ; tea was over, and the children had gone to bed. Ruth sat in her usual place making a frock for Winnie ; she greeted Barbara with pleasure,—but her manner was flurried and a little anxious : the old constrained look that had so often amazed Barbara was plainly discernible to-night.

"Naomi is right," she said to herself, "she is sadly changed. What ails her? She looks as wan and weak as a sick child ; and her eyes are heavy, just as though she had been weeping."

Wan and heavy-eyed she might be, but, in spite of all, her beauty was wonderful ; it almost oppressed Barbara.

Winnie was singing herself to sleep ; they could hear her through the open window ; the sound floated lightly towards them in a shrill childish treble, with a sleepy break every now and then of placid prose. "'I am going to glory,'" sang Winnie, "'Glory, glory.' Who makes the flappers? Do the angels? No, Bebe, no ; naughty Bebe. 'All nations who on earth do dwell.' 'We shall never part again,—no, never part again,'" and so on.

"Did you have a pleasant day, Ruth?" asked Barbara. "I

was sorry you were out. You spent it with your friend at Crowley."

"Yes, I found Kitty Monmouth at home: I went by appointment, you know. She was very kind and obliging, and sent gingerbread soldiers to the children. She is fond of children, is Kitty; we had a long talk about the school."

"Did you spend all your day at Crowley?" inquired Barbara. "What an ugly place! Rows of little red-brick houses, and a hideous church, and no fields; nothing but dust-heaps and market-gardens. Did you spend all your day there?"

"Kitty Monmouth is very good-natured," returned Ruth hurriedly. "Paul and Naomi don't care for her, because she's a little flighty; but she's been a true friend to me. She was busy, too, making dresses for the vicar's youngest daughter. She is going to be married, they say—and to a man old enough to be her father. One was quite lovely—a gauze, pale green, you know."

"Never mind the vicar's daughter," returned Barbara impatiently; "I hate the very thought of a dressmaker. I never could be friends with one; their rooms are always three-cornered, and have four horse-hair chairs and a sofa, and a round table full of fashion-books,—I should like to burn all the ladies with the smirking faces,—and a great wire thing with pink calico over it; and the fire generally smokes, and there's always a cat rolled up on one's new silk, and a lot of fusty, musty, gaudy old dresses hanging from hooks, and looking like Bluebeard's wives without their heads, and there's always a smell of boiled mutton; and," continued Barbara, rapidly losing breath, "if there's one thing I hate more than another, it's boiled mutton and capers."

"We had boiled mutton yesterday," said Ruth, laughing, "and we ate it in a room not a bit like what you described; for it opened with a glass door into such a pretty little garden, with an oyster-shell fountain, and an arbour, and a great pear-tree. But that is enough about Kitty Monmouth's. How do you get on with your painting, Miss Heathcote?"

"Oh, fairly—that is, well enough. Mr. Strath is rather a lazy master; he gets talking and forgets one. When is the school treat to come off at the Park, Ruth? Has Lady Hunsden made her arrangements?"

"She had; and so had we all, but Mr. Herbert's holiday has rather upset us; it won't be for another month now—not until the vicar is at home again: they say he's going to bring Mr.

Sydney back with him. That was a powerful sermon we heard at church last Sunday ; was it not, Miss Heathcote ? ”

The sermon that Ruth mentioned had been canvassed greatly in Sunningford ; it had been preached by a stranger, and had quite electrified many honest folk, who thought Mr. Herbert's quiet gentlemanly discourses perfection ; he was a little too learned occasionally—but what did that matter ? They had slept through many a quotation from the Fathers, many a wonderful disquisition on original sin and election ; why should they puzzle their brains over the deep-searching doctrines of Calvin ? But there had been no sleeping over this sermon ; Sunningford had sat winking and open-mouthed under such thundering eloquence.

Old Betty Moggs, of the Union, had wagged her bonnet incessantly, and wrung her shrivelled hands. “ It's like silver trumpets,” she said ; “ ah, we're miserable critturs, all of us ; and Lord have mussy on old Betty Moggs.”

Barbara had listened to this marvellous sermon, and had been made a little uncomfortable by it, and had talked it all over with Nest. It was on St. Peter's fall, and the subject—always a thrilling and painful one—had been finely handled. Ruth had touched on it now, and Barbara recalled all Nest had said.

“ It was a wonderful sermon,” she repeated musingly ; “ that was the Sunday when you felt so faint, Ruth—and Mrs. Deans gave you her smelling-bottle. I should remember that sermon if it were only from the way my brother fidgeted ; he is dreadfully restless in church, to be sure. Miss Strath told me she never heard a finer discourse, it was so eloquent ; and father and Hester talked about it at dinner ; but I cannot, no, I cannot understand it.”

“ Can't understand what, Miss Heathcote ? ”

“ Why the greatest saints had the deepest falls : David, and St. Peter, and the Magdalene, and all the rest of them. I am very wicked, but I do not seem to see it at all.”

“ It was to keep them humble, I suppose,” suggested Ruth.

“ But it is very unsatisfactory,” returned Barbara.

“ So it is, to our poor human reason ; but, you see, Miss Heathcote, that those great saints would have thought themselves so good and favoured that they would have got puffed up if the devil had not been allowed to tempt them, and make them do wrong sometimes.”

“ But what is the good of trying to keep right ? ” sighed

Barbara ; "we are not saints, and are never likely to be—but, you see, even they were not kept from those terrible falls."

"I don't know ; it is a very difficult subject, but one thing is certain, that the devil tempts those most who try the hardest."

"Does he?" returned Barbara in surprise.

"Yes, indeed. Where is it that one is most tried by wandering thoughts? In church. You see you are not safe even there ; they come to you in the sanctuary itself, or in your closet when you kneel down to pray."

"Humph," observed Barbara—she liked talking about saints, but she was out of her depth now—people who never really pray cannot be said to have wandering thoughts ; it was pleasanter to find fault with St. Peter than with oneself.

Ruth had laid down her work now, and her eyes took their misty far-away look ; there was a depth of pain in them.

"Miss Heathcote, God is good, and we may be trying our hardest ; He has kept us, maybe all our life long, from any great harm or wrong-doing, and then all of a sudden our fall comes."

"It can never come to you, Ruth," cried Barbara eagerly, touched by the sweet purity of the face before her ; but, almost before the words left her, Ruth had shuddered away from them, with a quick gesture that was almost horror.

"Oh, Miss Heathcote !" she gasped ; and then she sat pale and shrinking, sewing at her work, and trying to gain courage to speak. Barbara watched her with a nameless dismay ; something cold seemed to strike her with a sense of dread. "We're all going to glory," sang Winnie from above—"but not the puppy, and not Be-be—addidujah, addidujah !" Ruth raised her great brown eyes to the "quiet breadths of evening sky ;" they were full of tears.

"I thought with you, Miss Heathcote, once. I felt so safe, so good and happy. I used to look down on people, and think myself better than they ; if I heard of any one going wrong, I used to be so merciless. Often and often has Naomi said to me, 'Ruth, we can never know what we are till we're tempted ; who knows how busy the powers of evil were round that poor soul? Do not let us judge so hastily, for one day we may fall, and have no pity shown us ;' " but, added Ruth, with a sigh, "I never minded her—never—and so my punishment will be sore."

"My dear Ruth !"

"My punishment will be sore," she returned with streaming eyes. "To know the right and yet to turn away from it, to be tempted from the path of duty with our eyes wide open, to fall away from integrity, what punishment will be sufficient for these things?"

"Ruth, what is your trouble?"

She shivered at the question, but there was no response.

"I have been your true friend, Ruth; tell me your sorrow."

She hid her face in her hands, her bosom rose and fell with repressed sobs—low bitter sobs, but still she did not answer.

"Ruth, if you have done wrong and are sorry for it, surely Naomi and Paul will forgive you, they love you so dearly; what wrong have you done, can you have done, that should make their hearts hard to you? Surely it is you who are faithless to them."

"Faithless to them, Miss Heathcote! oh, forgive me, how can you know where the wrong lies?—sometimes I do not know myself. I was so blinded, and it all seemed so beautiful;" she dried her eyes with a sudden passionate movement; a strange tender look, more proud than sorrowful, seemed to shine in them. "I am weak to-night," she said with a little gasp, "weak and not myself; if I have done wrong, I must abide by it, for it is past undoing. God forgive me, for I would not undo it if I could."

"Not undo your wrong!" Honest plain-spoken Barbara could not understand it at all. "You would not set it right if you could, Ruth?"

"I think my good angel has forsaken me," cried Ruth wildly. "I have done wrong—have I not confessed it? but I glory in it. Miss Heathcote, you do not understand, you cannot; but remember this, if you are ever tempted to be hard on me, remember that Ruth tried to be good, but when her time of temptation came, her good angel deserted her."

"I don't believe it," returned Barbara staunchly; "it is not right, and it is not Scriptural. I never preach, indeed I don't know how; but if we have a good angel—and Miss Strath says we have, and I'm sure I hope so—he will not desert and turn his back upon us in our need. I don't read my Bible perhaps as much as I ought," confessed Bab; "I find it rather dull, sometimes, especially the genealogies and Leviticus; but your talk does not seem to me to be quite Scriptural, and you to go to church, and sit with the children."

"Oh, my children!" moaned Ruth; and then very hurriedly

"Miss Heathcote, leave me ; indeed I am not myself to-night ; come again to me, if you will, but leave me now."

"You do not care for me, then, Ruth ?"

"Do I not ? ay, dearly, dearly," and Ruth took the little hand stretched out to her, and kissed it almost passionately. "God bless you, Miss Heathcote."

"And you, too ; but if you love Barbara, you must trust in her. There, there, I will not vex you. I will go ; one day I hope you will tell me all, and we shall be friends again."

"Yes, yes," returned Ruth ; she was trembling now. There was a little click, a soft lifting of a latch from the stone yard outside, joyous whines from the foolish puppy.

"Winnie wants me," said Ruth, rising with a scared look ! "can you let yourself out, Miss Heathcote ?"

"Of course, of course," replied Barbara. "Ben, Ben, what are you doing, Ben ?" for Ben was snuffing excitedly at the door that communicated with the outer kitchen ; "it's only the puppy, sir, so come away." Ben obeyed reluctantly, and followed his mistress slowly into the mill garden ; he wanted to return once or twice, and gave a dubious whine or two, but Bab was so peremptory with him, and shook her little hazel switch so menacingly in his face, that he was obliged to abandon his desire ; it humiliated him though, and touched up his pride a little, so he had it out with two or three dogs on his way, and having laid them all on their backs howling, felt refreshed and himself again.

Barbara was what Nigel would have called a little difficult that evening ; her individuality was striking, she quite bristled with contradiction ; Dr. Heathcote thought she was tired.

"Tired ! not a bit of it," snapped Barbara. "Ben met the butcher's dog and nearly murdered him, and then he licked his lips ; he would not drink when he came in, and looked rather bloodthirsty. I am always thinking of hydrophobia. Tired ! why I would walk all the way to Briarsley, if I only knew which road Leigh would take :" and then she subsided into private life and a book ; she read it upside down for a little while, and then went fast asleep.

But she woke captious.

There were soft crunching sounds on the gravel outside, where Hester and Connie were pacing up and down, and then quick breaks of shadow as they passed and repassed the lighted window. Dr. Heathcote's paper and spectacles lay beside his reading-lamp : he had been called out to see a patient. Leigh

sat alone, elbows on knees, pushing his fingers through his heavy hair, and whistling in an under-breath ; only every now and then there was a quick-drawn breath like a sigh. Barbara was down upon him in a moment.

"It is a 'Sally come up,' indeed," she said irascibly ; "that is a choice ballad you're whistling ; why, where have you been all this evening, Leigh ?"

He started, and flung his hair off his forehead in his old way, — "I thought you were asleep, Barbara ; good - night ! pleasant dreams to you ;" and he resumed his whistling. Barbara rubbed her eyes.

"Where have you been, Leigh ?" she repeated fretfully ; "why don't you answer a person ?"

"I never answer impertinent questions," returned Leigh decidedly ; "come, shut up, Bab, and mind your own business. I am sitting in this chair at present, and am very much enlivened by your pleasing conversation."

"And that is your answer, is it, Leigh ?" She had crossed the room with sleepy gravity, and was standing beside him.

"Of course it is ; and for the future, Bab—here is a private hint for you—ask me no questions and I'll tell you no——" but she put her hand over his mouth and stopped him.

"Leigh, Leigh !" and yet more sadly, "Oh, Leigh !"

"Well, what's the matter now, Dame Muffet ?"

"The partnership is dissolved," said Barbara in a serio-comic voice. "Gyp, Bab, and Co. is no more—it's only Bab and Co. now."

He stared at her, and began whistling again.

"No more walks ; no more shrubbery strolls ; no talks in the Den ; no answers to civil questions—only snaps and sneers. Dame Muffet must take a new partner ; for Co. has misbehaved himself, and nearly killed the butcher's dog, and looks feverish."

There was a shade of pity in Leigh's face ; he looked at her a little wistfully.

"Dame Muffet must have a new partner, Gyp."

He gave a light laugh. "Well, Bab, which is it to be—Strath or St. Ronans ? St. Ronans is most worth having ; choose him, Babchen."

Two bright spots of colour came into Barbara's cheeks, and then she could not believe her ears. "What do you mean, Gyp ?" she asked slowly ; but just at that minute Dr. Heathcote came back, and Leigh left the room. Barbara had spoken

the truth in her quaint way : this unconscious barrier which had grown up between her and Leigh was no fancy ; it was growing a tangible reality. He was never at home, never alone a moment with her if he could help it ; her harmless questions were always met in this testy impatient manner ; if he could not silence her with a joke, he got angry. The old freedom of intercourse, the innocent twinship of affection in which they had hitherto lived, was fast becoming a thing of the past—a memory. Bab, who lamented so keenly over the trifling contradictions of daily life, kept her own counsel in this matter, and no one guessed the pain in the girl's heart when she first found she was losing the sweet empire of her brother's love.

She was a little anxious, she said once or twice to Mrs. Strath ; but Hester was anxious too ; they were afraid he had got into trouble again, his spirits were so variable, and he was so unlike himself ; but that was all. She kept her own private sorrow to herself. No wonder Nigel and even Nest found her a little difficult ; for it would not have been Bab to bear her unhappiness quite patiently. But she rather embraced the doctrine of works, and went a great deal to the cottage on Bex Hill ; she had a sort of idea that she was becoming great in her misfortunes. She got on very well with Mrs. Jackson, especially on secular subjects. She had a habit of confining herself to terrestrial matters till just before she took leave, when she generally plunged into a chapter without the slightest warning—pious jerks, as they might be called—and nothing provoked her more than interrupting her by asking a question, and she always answered these questions in a very loud voice, and with her eyes shut. But she would have enjoyed herself more if she could have kept Miss Shepherd out of the conversation. There is no denying that that departed saint aggravated her ; she felt as though she almost hated her.

"I wish we were all in the court of the Gentiles," said Bab, one day, when she was very much put to it on the subject of freewill and election. "Mrs. Jackson, if we climb up so high, we shall get dizzy and topple over—let us finish the chapter ;" and Mrs. Jackson, struck by that pious yearning, abstained from further comment that day ; and the next time Barbara coaxed Nest to go with her.

"You are so clever at these things, and I want to take a lesson," she said humbly ; so Nest, marvelling much, and a little loath, went with her. And she got on so famously that

she filled Barbara with envy ; she was rather discontented when they came out.

"What a lovely evening !" said Nest ; she was flushed and a little eager ; her talk had excited her.

"Of course it is a fine evening," returned Barbara quickly ; "but that's not the point, Nest. How do you manage to explain things so beautifully ?"

"Who, I ?—oh, I don't know. I suppose people talk best about what they feel most deeply. Now I always think that subject the most striking in the Old Testament."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Barbara. "Never mind the subject. What I mean is, that you got on like a house on fire, and everything seemed to fit into each other as smoothly as possible. Now I am sure I have that poor woman's welfare at heart, and want to do her good, and all that ; but I suppose—well, the fact is," and here Barbara snapped at a retreating truth—"I am afraid I don't feel these things very deeply after all."

"I am afraid that is it, Barbara," returned Nest very slowly. "I wish you could care more about religion."

"There, I knew you would preach," exclaimed Barbara peevishly. "Every one preaches to me. When it's not Mrs. Strath, it's Norman, or Hester, or even St. Ronans. I declare I am sick of it."

"Oh, Barbara ! you know I never intended to preach," cried Nest reproachfully.

Her tone recalled Barbara to good humour. "You never talk cant, Nest ; don't think I meant that," she hastened to explain. "It's an unconscious preach, that is what it is ; and the worst of that sort is, it makes itself felt. But, to return to what I was saying, I can't talk and make much of subjects—draw inferences, as Mrs. Jackson calls them, as you do."

"You will in time, you know," said Nest soothingly. "It wants practice and experience."

"Oh, I shall have plenty of both when I undertake a district. But just to give you an instance, Nest, why, the other day I was reading about Noah's ark——"

"Well ?" asked Nest inquiringly ; for Barbara had paused, and looked a little ashamed.

"Well, of course Mrs. Jackson wanted me to say something about the terrible judgment of the Flood, and the rainbow promise, and all that, but I couldn't ; I was wondering all the time, how ever they found room for the elephant, and what they

fed it on, and how unpleasant it must have been to live in a floating Zoological Gardens."

Nest broke into a merry laugh. "Oh, Barbara," she said, "I am afraid you try to make yourself out more childish than you really are." Bab's eyes twinkled. "You, the clever Miss Heathcote, and to talk this rubbish!"

Barbara smiled, and looked delighted; she had given a comic turn to the conversation and was beginning to feel happy. "Miss Vokes has no sense of humour," she remarked *à propos* to nothing. Nest was mystified.

"They were just on the outskirts of Sunningford; in another minute they would pass the cottage of Susan Moggs, the slattern and scold of the village. It was a low miserable-looking cottage, of a yellowish-grey colour, and the garden that ran all round it was as unkempt and untended as its owner. Bab shrugged her shoulders at the straggling beds and paths overgrown with weeds; two small black pigs had got loose from an adjoining outhouse, and were making a day of it among the vegetables; in the porch stood a wretched-looking uncombed child, crying and whining like a starved puppy.

"Why, it's Tommy," cried Bab, "one of Hester's scholars. He is the black sheep of the school, is Tommy; but I must run and ask him what is the matter," for Bab had a weakness for boys. The boy took his fist out of his eyes, but went on crying. "Now, Tommy, if you won't tell me, I shall call a policeman," said Barbara decidedly. There was one policeman in the whole place, and he was at present down with the rheumatism.

"I'll tell ye, missis," he gasped out, "mam's took ill, she be; and the little 'un, Sue, she's fell out of her chair, she have, and broken her arm; and baby, she——"

"Oh, hush—hush!" cried Bab hurriedly. "Nest, come here." But Nest had heard, and was drawing near with a face full of sympathy. "What shall we do?" asked Bab with a little flurry.

Nest took the command with a quiet decision that astonished Barbara.

"Here, Tommy," she said, "run down the village as fast as you can, and ask Dr. Heathcote or young Dr. Strath to step up here at once; be quick, Tommy."

But Tommy needed no second bidding; he nodded, took to his heels, and was out of sight in a moment.

"Now let us go in and see what is to be done."

"Go in?" returned Barbara; "no, I must not, Daddy said—wait, Nest." But Nest, with a look of mild reproach at Barbara's hesitation, which she put down at once to timidity, unlatched the door and went in. So she—Nest—was to have all the work and the glory, and Barbara must remain outside. "Circumstances alter cases," thought Bab, and she followed her boldly in.

For a moment both the young girls drew back involuntarily; they were not prepared for such wretchedness. It was a small squalid room, dirty, disordered, and heated to suffocation, every crack and cranny of the one small window being stuffed up with rags and such like small gear; over the black smoky fire was a battered kettle, trying hard to boil, and dribbling its contents at intervals out of its leaky side; every now and then there was a faint hiss and splutter of perishing water.

There was a woman lying on the miserable bed, with a crying baby beside her, and huddled up at the foot another child, moaning piteously. She sat up erect in bed, and looked at them, moving her head from side to side, and pulling at her ragged nightcap as she did so. Barbara knew the red face and vixenish mouth well—it was Susan Moggs; but she was shocked at the vacant wandering glances and meaningless words.

"There's Sue," she said, rocking herself, and speaking in an aggravated voice, "there's Sue has been and fallen into the fire; where's my big stick? Tummus, you're not minding the little 'uns; come here, you rascal, I say," and she dropped on her pillow muttering.

"It is the fever, Nest," cried Bab in a terrified whisper.

"If you are afraid, you had better go out, Barbara," returned Nest very quietly; "I shall remain here." And she unlatched the window—and set open the door; a cool refreshing current of air passed through the place. "Do go out, Barbara, if you're afraid," she repeated as she passed her.

"I am not afraid," returned Barbara crossly; "let me hold that baby, Nest;" and she took up the fretful infant, and walked him up and down in a thorough draught. She did not like to confess it, but the foul air of the place made her feel faint and sick; but she forgot her unpleasant sensations in her astonishment at Nest. Nest did wonders. She found out, though how Barbara could not tell, that the child's arm was not broken, but only bruised and dislocated; so by a little petting and humouring of the smoky fire, and management of

the leaking kettle, she contrived to procure some warm water, rags full of which were tenderly applied to the blackened arm, till the little sufferer, soothed and comforted, ceased the piteous wail which had so excited the poor mother, and lay quite quiet in Nest's lap, staring at her out of two great black eyes. Bab paused in her soft bye-byeing walk, and stood by her astonished, and a little envious.

“You do that as though you had been accustomed to children all your life,” said Barbara, with a furtive sigh.

“I—I have rarely touched one; hush, Sue, don't move. I want to lay you down.” And Nest very carefully deposited the little creature on a rude couch, composed of the rug and some old shawls.

“Speak to her every now and then, Barbara, while I attend to her poor mother.”

Barbara nodded and resumed her walk; the baby had been restless and fretful hitherto, but its moving cradle pleased it; it began to coo softly, as babies will, its open mouth moving over Barbara's cheek: these blind aimless touches, these crumpled hands, these faintly uttered coos, were new revelations to Barbara. She forgot the foul room, the pestilential odours, Sue lying with her black stiffened arm, the mutterings of the woman, even the dirt-begrimed garments that she had first touched so daintily, and her eyes took a soft dreamy look as they followed Nest about.

But there was no dreaming for Nest. She was working hard now, turning the pillows, smoothing the tumbled clothes, freshening the poor creature's burning hands and face, and giving drink and soothing words together, then straightening the miserable room and brushing up the hearth, warming a little milk for the baby, and showing Barbara how to administer it. By and by she had contrived a more comfortable resting-place for Sue, and then, and not till then, she went to the open door for a fresh whiff of air, leaning heavily against it, as one sorely tired. Barbara saw her fast-paling face, and hastened to her.

“Do you feel faint, Nest?”

“Only a little, but my head aches so; it is that close smell, I think. Oh, there is Norman. I am so glad, and Tommy is with him; let us go back into the room, Barbara.”

Barbara followed her in, but she felt very guilty. Nest was acting innocently; Nest had not disobeyed her father. Bab wondered if Norman had heard of the injunction, and

whether he would be displeased. She had never come across him in his professional capacity before—perhaps he would think her conduct praiseworthy, taking a leaf out of Miss Vokes's book. Yes, she was sure he would think it praiseworthy; she went on bye-byeing valiantly, with the step of a practised nurse. There was a clang of the little gate, and a quick stride up the gravel path, and then Dr. Strath's shadow blocked up the little entry. He took a swift survey of the whole—Nest, Sue, Barbara, and the baby—and then he turned round to Tommy. "Miss Vokes," Barbara could hear him say. Tommy ducked and vanished.

"Rock-a-bye, baby, hush—hush—hush!" said Barbara.

Dr. Strath walked straight up to her, with a brow as black as thunder.

"Lay that baby down in the crib, Barbara," he said sternly. "Why are you looking at me? do what I tell you; there now, go into the front garden, and I will send Nest to you."

"But Sue and Mrs. Moggs, Norman; do let me take the baby out with me, please."

"Do what I tell you," he returned, with a look that made Barbara quail. He scarcely glanced at Nest or the woman, but stood by till Barbara had got rid of her burthen, and was turning sulkily to the door.

"Is that the way he treats Miss Vokes!" she said to herself, and then Nest joined her.

"He says we are to wait for him; but what have we done, and why was he so angry with you?" Nest looked a little frightened.

"Who cares whether he is angry or not? I shall not wait," returned Bab defiantly, and she swung the gate to and fro with an indecision that belied her words; "a pack of professional rubbish!" grumbled Barbara.

"Well, I don't know; he seems very angry; he spoke quite fiercely to you, Barbara, and I am sure we were doing our duty."

"You were: I am not so sure about mine," blurted out truthful Barbara. "There's Tommy. Tommy, where have you been?"

"Miss Vokes," panted out the boy; "and she——"

"Tommy, come here;" and Dr. Strath stood on the threshold; there was no disobeying him. Barbara pouted, and let him go. Nest leaned against the gate: her head was no better, and she was tired out.

"It was all that reading at Mrs. Jackson's," she said, "and the long hot walk and the close stifling room had finished it; but there, it was no use talking about it, she should be better presently, and there was Norman, yes, there he was again, speaking a few parting words to Tommy."

"Be sure you tell her that I will be back again in a couple of hours; and I will send up Betsy Baker to take her place;" and he came striding down towards the two girls. Nest was waiting for him; but Barbara was on ahead, trying to assume an air of unconscious dignity, and admiring the sunset. Dr. Strath was up with her in a trice, and then they all three walked on silently. Barbara took a stealthy glance at him occasionally, and that was all.

"Do you mind walking a little slower, Norman?" said Nest in a patient sort of a way. He looked at her, slackened his pace, and then it was all over with them.

"You have a headache, Nest, I can see that very plainly, and are as faint as you can be, and with reason; but you must not come to me for pity. I have none for imprudence and senselessness."

This roused Nest. "Why, Norman, how you talk! One would think we were doing wrong, Barbara and I, instead of trying to minister to the relief of these poor creatures."

"I have nothing to say to you, Nest," he returned; "you were merely ignorant, and doing everything to the best of your ability. But I should like to ask, what Barbara meant by her conduct?"

"Should you?" was on the tip of Barbara's tongue; but she preserved an obstinate silence.

"I was very sorry to find you, Nest, in that reeking fever-den yonder. I fear you may have reason to regret it, poor child; but for Barbara there—Barbara, who never visits, never cares in any way about her poor and sick neighbours—to indulge in this mad freak, in direct disobedience to her father's orders." Here there was a little shocked "Oh!" from Nest. "Tell me, Barbara—you never equivocate—did you have no such order from Dr. Heathcote?"

Barbara nodded gloomily.

"The command was a stringent one, and given to Hester and Connie also. There were threats of this fever in Durnford; it might spread to Sunningford; it has spread, and, according to my prediction, Susan Moggs is the first victim."

"Has she really got the fever, Norman?"

"Really and positively. You have done a foolish thing, Nest; why did you not come in for Miss Vokes and me?"

"Tommy said Susy had broken her arm."

"Well?"

"Well, I thought we might go in and see what was the matter, and hold the baby. Barbara said it was fever, and seemed frightened; so I told her to go out, and I would stay."

"You have disobeyed no order, Nest: if you like to run foolishly into danger, it was at your own risk; but Barbara knows that she ought not to have done it."

"Barbara knows nothing of the kind," she returned haughtily.

He did not look at her, or answer her, but continued what he was saying:

"I have sent for Miss Vokes; she is well seasoned and fit for this work; she and Betsy Baker will do all that is necessary."

"But will she get better, Norman?" asked Nest pleadingly.

"Tut! how do I know? The chances are not in her favour, but time will show. Here we are at St. Ronans; run in, Nest, and change your dress, and wash your hands before you talk to your mother and Nigel. Prevention is better than cure. You need not tell them anything of it—Nigel is a nervous subject; forget all about it—that is the best." He spoke in his old kind manner, and Nest looked up at him with a grateful smile.

"I am not frightened, Norman."

"Frightened! of course not," he replied brusquely; "run in out of the dews. I will look in in a day or two, and see how your head is; we must cure those headaches, Nest."

The rest of the walk was not specially enjoyable to Barbara. Dr. Strath maintained perfect silence; every minute Bab hoped he would leave her, or at least say something, but he did neither; and when they came to the green gate in the wall, it swung slowly back on Dr. Heathcote's tall figure. Barbara darted after him in a moment, and Norman followed.

"Daddy, I want to speak to you."

"Ah, is that you, Bab?" returned her father, smiling at her. "Wait a moment: I've got a message for Norman. Norman, Miss Vokes says——"

"Ah, Dad, wait a moment, you must hear me first. Do you know, Dad, I went into Susan Moggs's cottage, and she has the fever; and Nest attended to her while I held the baby,

and Norman found us, and he is so angry ; and you told me not to go, and I remembered it just before I went in." And Bab paused, ruddy and breathless, all her sullenness gone.

"You disobeyed me, Barbara ; you remembered that I told you not to go, did you say ?"

"Yes, perfectly," she admitted frankly. "'Circumstances alter cases,' I said to myself, and I went in."

"You did very wrong, Bab—very wrong indeed," replied Dr. Heathcote gravely ; and he said no more : such complete honesty disarmed him.

"Would you believe it, sir," struck in Norman, "that I found them both there in the thick of it? Barbara had the baby in her arms, as she said, and Nest was sitting by the bedside. They had opened the window, to cause a thorough draught ; and were both of them looking as white and faint, and no wonder in such an atmosphere—it was enough to breed a pestilence."

Dr. Heathcote grew a little pale. "You never disobeyed me before," he said in a vexed tone, and his eyes searched the girl's face anxiously. "I thought I could trust you, Bab," he added reproachfully ; "you knew my wishes, it seems, only to disregard them."

Barbara hung her head. "It was very wrong, Daddy, I see it now ; but 'circumstances alter cases,' I thought, and I went in ; but I did not enjoy myself," she continued with a little pout. "I couldn't help feeling frightened and thinking of you all the time, and about the ravens that pecked out the eyes of disobedient children. I did indeed, Daddy."

The doctor smiled sadly.

"You see you had no right to exercise your private judgment in the matter," said Norman severely. "You have given us all a fright, Barbara, by your self-will."

She turned from him a little sulkily. "I was not talking to you, Norman," she said, and then she gave her father a penitent hug. "Bab's sorry, Daddy."

"So am I, my child."

"And she will never do it again till the next time ; and not even then, if you don't like."

"I believe you, Barbara."

"And you'll trust me again?" she pleaded, still clinging to him.

The doctor nodded gravely to reassure her ; but he sighed a little, and then she went in. She had never once looked at Dr. Strath.

But, coming down afterwards into the Harlequin room, she found him standing by the window, and evidently waiting for her ; it was so evident, indeed, that she took up a book and began to read. He came towards her in a moment.

"I was waiting to say good-night, Barbara."

"Oh, good-night, Norman ;" and she put down her book in a great demonstration of hurry, and shook hands ; but still he did not go.

"Why were you too proud to own to me that you were in the wrong ?" he said, detaining her as she stood beside him.

She glanced up at him in surprise, and then her tone changed ; he was so hurt, so much in earnest, that her ill-humour vanished.

"You did not give me the opportunity ; you were so cross, Norman. Besides," with a little toss of her head, "you had no right to question me so."

"No right, Barbara ?"

"No," she replied decisively ; "certainly, no right to lecture me as you did."

"Then I am no longer Bab's friend," and he dropped her hand quickly and moved away ; but Barbara was frightened into penitence again, and ran after him.

"Norman, what is the matter with you to-night ? Why do you take me up so ? Bab will never give up her friend."

"Never, Barbara ?"

"Oh no, never !" she repeated, pressing closer to him. He almost drew her towards him ; his face worked, his whole manner changed, he seemed about to say something, when Nigel suddenly walked in.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BAB'S STORY.

"She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition,
She holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested."

SHAKESPEARE.

"Falsehood, cowardice, and poor descent,
Three things that women highly hold in hate."

Ibid.

It was a week or two since the events narrated in the last chapter. Quiet busy days they were to Barbara, only

enlivened by a longer chat than usual with Nigel, or a few kind words from Norman ; but she was working steadily at her painting now, and making no little progress, in spite of her young master's lax discipline. Indeed, he began to regard her efforts with secret surprise and almost reverence. "My pupil will astonish us all one of these days," he observed to Dr. Strath ; but Dr. Strath merely nodded.

Barbara went to the cottage at Bex Hill regularly. It was part of that doctrine of works which she had so eagerly embraced ; and if only she could have felt that her visits were a comfort to the now dying woman, she would have been perfectly contented, but in her inner consciousness she knew that such was not the case. Mrs. Jackson used to listen to her patiently, and try and be grateful for the crumbs vouchsafed ; but that she yearned for something stronger and sweeter than Barbara could give her was evident, from the way in which she begged her to come often, and bring Nest. Barbara's jealous self-sufficiency faded before the awful responsibility of a fast approaching death-bed, and at her urgent entreaty Nest became the constant companion of her daily visits.

One evening the two girls were returning from Mrs. Jackson's. Barbara was in high spirits, but Nest was grave and more than usually silent. She had heard that day that Susan Moggs was dead, and she was filled with compunction at the thoughtlessness which had led her friend and herself into so much danger. Barbara rallied her in vain. "You are so triste, *ma chère* ; you quite oppress me." And then she went on chattering gaily about the picture she was painting for her father, and which was intended as a surprise for his birthday. "It is to be a glimpse of the pine-woods, Nest, just as we saw them that evening at sunset ; and the only figure is to be a boy gathering faggots. St. Ronans says it will be my best picture."

"Yes," answered Nest wearily. She had a jaded look, as though in pain ; and dragged herself along almost with difficulty. They had had a long hot walk, and the room at Mrs. Jackson's, though perfectly clean, had seemed close and oppressive ; added to which Barbara had thoughtlessly chosen the longest way round, hoping to meet Leigh, as she said, forgetting that Nest—never a good walker at any time—had been ailing and out of sorts for the last week or two ; for Barbara, as is often the case with robust people, had little sympathy for the small ailments of others.

She trotted along, therefore, at her usual pace, talking

incessantly, and every now and then grumbling at Nest's want of interest.

"You walk so fast, Barbara," she said once, rather feebly. Bab slackened her steps with visible impatience, but talked louder than ever: she was repeating an excellent joke. Presently she set off at a tangent again, trotting hard, as Leigh called it.

Suddenly Nest put out her hand and felt for her. "Oh, Barbara! I'm so giddy," she cried. "The trees are all walking, and the roads—and——" but she never finished her sentence, for Bab caught her just as she was falling.

"I had her under the hedge in a twinkling," said Barbara, in her graphic way, when she narrated this little episode afterwards. "The horse was coming along at a furious pace, quite a mad gallop, and in another minute she must have been under the hoofs, if it hadn't been for my presence of mind. I don't, of course, wish to make myself out a heroine," finished Barbara modestly; "but I think, when a person has saved three lives by her readiness and presence of mind, she may be said to be of more consequence than Miss Vokes, who after all is only a 'charitable charwoman.'"

"Never mind Miss Vokes," cried Connie. "You are dreadfully irrelevant, Barbara. Whose horse was coming along—Norman's?"

"Norman's!—of course not. It was Geoffrey's—Geoffrey, of all people you know; and—and——" but here we must leave Barbara to finish her narrative in her own way. Barbara had heard the sound of horses' hoofs, but she had no idea it was Sir Geoffrey till he had dismounted and come up to them with his horse's bridle over his arm.

"Good gracious! is that you, Barbara? And who have you got there in the ditch?" And then he stopped, troubled at the ghastly face before him. Barbara was almost as pale as Nest; but she was down upon him in a moment. "Take that great black brute away—no, she's brown. I did not put her under the hedge to be trampled on. Good gracious me, Geoffrey!"—with a little scream—"do back her into the road."

"She's like a lamb, but for her play," he returned, half angrily. "Here, slip your arm through the bridle, Barbara, while I lift up this poor child. It is a fainting-fit, that's what it is. So-ho! my lady, stand steady. Now, Barbara."

"Well, I'm sure!" returned Barbara. She was shaking in

every limb, and terribly frightened ; but she did as she was told for all that, while Geoffrey gathered up poor Nest tenderly in his arms out of her uncomfortable couch of weeds and dock-nettle.

"I'll take her to my mother—we're just by the park gates. Come along, Barbara."

"Oh, it's all very well saying come along," retorted Barbara, with chattering teeth. "Woa, woa ! She's backing terribly, Geoffrey : she will drag me all the way to Durnford. Woa, woa ! I say."

"Don't pull at her like that Barbara. What are you doing ? She's playful, that's what she is. Steady ! So-ho, Lady-bird, so-ho !"

"So-ho !" echoed Barbara pleadingly, not knowing what magic there might be in these sounds. Lady-bird ceased to strain so violently, and turned round and looked Barbara in the face, throwing up her hind legs pleasantly, and evidently prepared for a game, proceedings which terrified Barbara exceedingly ; but Geoffrey was already striding on at a furious pace, and she and her strange companion must follow him. "We can only die once," said Bab, with sublime resignation, as Lady-bird's eccentric curvetings brought her out into the middle of the road. "It will sound bad though—Barbara Heatcote, a victim to the thoughtlessness of her brother-in-law ! Let me get my arm out. Woa ! Oh, good gracious !" But Barbara could add no more. Lady-bird had lost sight of her master, and broke into a cheerful canter after him, dragging the luckless Barbara with her, and never stopping till they were at the hall-door itself. "If ever I turn groom again !" said Barbara, crimson and breathless from the hardest run she had ever had in her life. "Where's everybody, and what have they done with her ? There are footsteps on the new gravel round to the left," she argued shrewdly ; "they must be your tracks, Master Geoffrey : anyhow I'll follow them."

Hunsden Park, as it was called, was a bare dreary-looking place, being nothing more nor less than half-a-dozen fields thrown into one ; and the Hall itself, a great overgrown cottage, built of grey stone, much defaced and blackened by age. There was no pretension to style, certainly not to ornament. The whole place was barren ; the gardens showy and without taste. But it was Lady Hunsden's one ambition that Geoffrey should build a new house. He had yielded to her lately, and the works were already commenced ; but, as the new site was only a little

removed from the old, the heaps of red clay and wilderness of bricks and stones did not add much to the cheerfulness of the outside prospect. Inside it was better. Lady Hunsden had made the most of the dark low rooms, and had succeeded in giving them an air of old-fashioned comfort, which went far to redeem their general tastelessness.

Barbara was right in her surmise that Geoffrey had gone round to the back ; he had startled his mother sadly by stepping suddenly through the window of her parlour with his strange burden.

Barbara found her still standing open-mouthed with bewilderment, and Nest laid on the sofa, trying to speak, with closed eyes, while Geoffrey's huge form reared up against the mantelpiece, looking as though a feather would knock him over.

"Bless us and save us !" cried the good lady, "and here's another ?" and Lady Hunsden looked round for her spectacles.

"It's only Barbara, mother," called out Geoffrey impatiently. "You were going to call Hickson, you know. Hickson will tell us what to do with the poor child." He rang the bell violently, and stooped over the sofa, putting back the long heavy hair from her face with his great hand.

"I am better," whispered Nest. "Is that you, Barbara ?—where have you been ?"

"Geoffrey knows," returned Barbara, with a withering glance as she knelt down by Nest. "Don't talk, dear ; you must lie quiet. Some one must give her some brandy-and-water, you know," she continued, with a little assumption of command. "Wine is out of the question—never mind gentility. I am a doctor's daughter, you know, Lady Hunsden. A little brandy-and-water !"

"Hear her !" cried Lady Hunsden admiringly ; "but we had better wait for Hickson—Hickson will know ;" and she stroked her satin gown approvingly, and nodded to her son. "Young things will be young things, after all. We'll wait for Hickson."

It had been said by some unkindly tongue in the neighbourhood that Lady Hunsden spoke three words to every one else's one, and that the third was always "Hickson." However that might be, she was certainly her ladyship's factotum. She came up presently—a stout sleepy-looking woman, with a blond front and a satin gown like Lady Hunsden's, with a face of impenetrable stolidity.

"Hickson, this young lady is faint ; she looks fluttered still,

poor soul. Your master, Sir Geoffrey, carried her home. What shall we give her?" Lady Hunsden usually spoke with breaks or pauses, sometimes ruminating, chiefly asthmatical.

"Brandy-and-water, my leddy," said Hickson stolidly.

Barbara clapped her hands.

"Give her some directly, Geoffrey. There, poor dear!" as Sir Geoffrey carefully administered the dose. "Well, what next, Hickson?"

"Put her to bed, my leddy," continued Hickson, after a brief but keen survey out of her pale blue eyes.

"Yes, truly; and then, Hickson?"

"Send for the doctor, my leddy, and," with a flutter of her cap-strings, "send sharp."

"You hear what she says, mother," said Geoffrey, who was pawing round the sofa like an unwieldy horse. "Which room, Mrs. Hickson?—quick, lead the way." And before his mother could interfere, he had taken up Nest in his arms again, and was following Mrs. Hickson's ponderous walk, Barbara bringing up a slow trot behind him.

Barbara did not want to laugh, but it was all so funny as she trundled after Geoffrey up the low dark stairs, with the blond front bobbing up before them; and then she found herself in a queer-shaped room, with a great hideous bed, with blue dragons sprawling all over the curtains, and a high black wardrobe that shone like a mirror. The whole place had a sweet fusty smell about it. Geoffrey laid his light burden down on the bed; her long hair swept over his cheek: his face was flushed; his deep voice had an odd break in it. "I am going for the doctor, Barbara," he said: "stay with her." Barbara nodded, and presently she and Mrs. Hickson had plenty to do. They got her to bed at last, after an argument on Barbara's part. Hickson did the greatest part of the work, however, and proved herself as strong as a lion. Barbara was a little helpless, but full of bustle.

"There, how do you feel, dear?" she said at last, patting the soft pillows, and leaning over her. "You're comfortable, you're better, are you not?"

"I don't know," replied Nest, hesitating; "the giddiness is gone, but my limbs ache so; and feel how hot my hands are. Barbara," she continued seriously, "Susan Moggs is dead, do you think I have the fever?"

"Fever? Stuff, nonsense!" But a cold tremor ran through Barbara. "You must not get these fancies, Nest, it is wrong.

You've had too long a walk, and were faint. It is very wicked of her to talk in this way, Hickson, is it not?"

Hickson, who was folding up some clothes, advanced with the promptitude of an elephant.

"You must not talk to her, Miss Heathcote. You had better go down to my leddy. She ought to go to sleep after that brandy-and-water;" and Hickson left the room.

"Oh, I don't want to go to sleep," said Nest, smiling faintly. "Don't go, Barbara. What a dear old room this is! Look at that dragon china, and these queer oval-shaped miniatures over the fireplace. Count them, Bab, dear."

"Five-and-twenty," returned Barbara correctly.

"How funny! They are all little boys with frills, are they not? And what crooked legs all the chairs have; and this coverlet is satin patchwork, just look! and oh, how comfortable this bed is—like a nest of feathers;" and she gave a great sigh of content. "Don't fret, Barbara, I shan't mind if I am ill here, in this dear old place."

"You are not going to be ill," said Barbara, stroking her face; but she felt a great twinge of pain, in spite of herself. Nest did look very ill, certainly.

By and by Lady Hunsden came up, and then Dr. Strath. He looked at Barbara as he entered, and in a low tone bade her go down. In the dusky hall she came upon Geoffrey, walking restlessly up and down. He seemed glad to see her, however, and made her comfortable in his rough hospitable way, putting her in his mother's chair, and giving her a footstool.

"For you're tired, Barbara, and have had a fright, so we must take care of you. Lady H.—my mother, I mean—has ordered up some tea, and you must drink it and be quiet;" and he resumed his restless walk up and down.

"Thank you, Geoffrey," she returned, touched at his new thoughtfulness; and this was all that passed between them; but Barbara remembered that evening long afterwards. It fitted into her memory like a picture in an old-fashioned setting—Geoffrey's restless strides; the room, a little faded perhaps, but softly lit with wax candles in silver sconces; dark wainscoting, and old portraits in dim oval frames; a gleaming tea-equipage, a tiger rug, with a lean grey old hound stretched out on it; a sweet smell of sandal-wood, silence, and waiting drowsiness. It was quite a relief when Dr. Strath came down, with his quick decided voice and tread.

He went up to Sir Geoffrey at once, and the two men had a little talk at the other end of the room.

Barbara could not hear a word that they said, but she noticed that Geoffrey looked pale and jaded, and that he could not keep his hands still. "Oh ho!" thought Barbara; and then she got impatient and yawned, and tried to make friends with the grizzly hound, but he growled and snarled at her toothlessly. "Norman," she called out at last, and then they came to her. "Is it the fever, Norman?"

"Why, yes," he returned, rather reluctantly, "I am afraid it is. Only a slight touch, I hope. Nest has a pretty fair constitution, and looks weaker than she really is."

"Will you take a message from me to Hester?" interrupted Bab quickly.

"A dozen, if you like," he returned, smiling down upon her. "As regards this one, however——" but she would not let him finish his sentence.

"I shall want her to send up some things for me to-morrow—a dress, and some other items. I will put them down on paper. Lady Hunsden can lend me what I want to-night."

"Softly, softly, my dear child," returned Dr. Strath; and then very kindly, though with some difficulty, he made her understand that her services were not required; that Lady Hunsden would be nurse, and Hickson under her; and that he could not, no, he could not hear of her running any further risks. If she got her father's consent, well and good; but that he must take the liberty of insisting that she should return home at once, leaving Nest to the care of her kind friends.

It would not have been Barbara to yield quietly to this sensible proposition. She knew that she had no experience and no capacity for nursing; that she would probably be as helpless in a sick-room as a fish out of water; but, true to her nature, she had a long argument with Norman, and turned so very sulky at her non-success, that Geoffrey was obliged to come to the rescue. He walked with her as far as the park gates, dilating on his mother's great skill and experience in all matters pertaining to illness, and begging Barbara to set her mind quite at ease about her friend. But she became so doleful, and argued out Susan Moggs' case with such dismal prognostications concerning Nest, that he left them abruptly; and Norman took her to task severely for talking such nonsense, and making that good Sir Geoffrey so uncomfortable.

"What is it to him, whether Nest lives or dies?" she

retorted fiercely ; and after that they were quite silent. Barbara was inclined to be a little restive when she got home. She became satirical, and wanted to preserve a strict quarantine in her own den for the next few days, and begged her father to allow her to go up to one of the London hospitals, and be properly trained for nursing, that she might be allowed in future to attend her friends' death-beds. Here she broke down, and became rather hysterical ; but they were all very kind, and petted her, and Dr. Heathcote spoke warmly of his Barbara's ready presence of mind. And so this little whimsical being, who, as Nigel averred, was half child, half woman, and half Brownie, dried her eyes, forgot her dolefulness, and took off Lady H. to the life, with the delicious comic gravity that was one of Bab's chief charms. But she cried herself to sleep for all that, and for the next day or two was so subdued and out of spirits, that Hester grew secretly alarmed, and told her father that she was afraid that Barbara was going to fall ill too. Barbara rather thought so herself.

But after a few days she had other causes of disquiet, and had forgotten all about it. The illness, as it turned out, was a very slight one—a sort of low fever, not infectious ; and so she was soon admitted to Nest's room. She found her very weak, but quite happy, with a new sunshiny look on her face, and perfectly surrounded by flowers.

Barbara got into the habit of going up to Hunsden Park daily, and stopping for hours. These visits became a sort of necessity to her. She often used to break off in the middle of painting, an hour before the usual time, that she might go and sit with Nest—a piece of independent action, by the bye, that provoked St. Ronans excessively. The lessons did not go on quite so smoothly at this time ; he was critical, not to say captious, found fault with her best work, and was terribly aggravating. But he looked ill, and said he was suffering from heat, and so she bore with him. Nest used to give her a sweet welcoming smile. Geoffrey was in the habit of carrying her every morning to a sunny room, Lady Hunsden's dressing-room, which looked over the park, and placing her up on a great couch at the open window. Barbara used to find him there most mornings, sometimes with his mother, and sometimes alone. He would hover about the two girls incessantly. Barbara opened her eyes rather widely at the dainty fruit and flowers that came up with the master's compliments. Nest coloured a little, but she took it all very quietly. Barbara fancied that she grew to

listen for his footsteps, and always seemed a little distraught and restless if the morning passed without his visit. But they both wondered at Barbara's gravity, and with reason. Barbara said very little, but she noticed everything. She was working out a problem in her solid way ; and, to do her justice, the solution was making her miserable. She was puzzling over Geoffrey's altered looks and ways, and the result at which she arrived was not a pleasant one. She used to come home from those visits as sober as a little judge, and singularly reticent on all that had passed during the day. "Was Nest better?" "Oh yes, much better, but still weak. Lady Hunsden had been sitting with them. Nest was growing quite fond of her, and she of Nest. She was a dear fussy old soul," and so on ; but not a word about Geoffrey or the flowers, though perhaps he had been with them half the day, dropping his loud voice till it was soft enough for a sick-room, and handling Nest's pillows with a hand which, despite its size, was as gentle as a woman's. No, Barbara told none of these things ; neither did Sir Geoffrey, when he came up of an evening to pay dutiful visits to his betrothed. But Barbara had a sort of fancy that he shunned her eyes, and deported himself more awkwardly than ever before her ; but, secretly exasperated as she was, her words were perfectly smooth to him ; and no one, he least of all, detected the two sentinels in Bab's eyes.

But every night, as she laid her head on the pillow, she would say the same thing, "I am a woman of my word, and I hate lies ;" and once, very fiercely, "You are a hypocrite, Geoffrey ;" and then she went to bed.

But one day she noticed Geoffrey's hand touched Nest's long hair, half fondling and half sad ; and such a light gleamed from the two sentinels ! and then she went home in a little fury.

And, happening to wake up in the middle of the night, she apostrophised the darkness, and sat up cramped and hot, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "Half the world tells lies," she said, "and the other half is cracked. What a damaged old world it is ! But I am a woman of my word, and I'll stick to it." And then she made up her mind, and felt a heroine, and lay down flat and rehearsed her part, and made a sort of a vow in a moon-struck way. "Hester is my sister, and Nest is my friend. You're a fool, Geoffrey, and I'm another ; but some one shall tell the truth for the honour of the Heathcotes ; and bless dear old Daddy, would he not make a tangle of it !" She

laughed with wet eyes, and then composed herself; and when she had entirely rehearsed her part, she had a long nap, and woke refreshed.

She quarrelled with Nigel all the morning, and made herself very disagreeable. He called her Bab the wrangler, and refused to have anything more to do with her. "You've had a sunstroke, St. Ronans; that's what's the matter with you!" Barbara politely assured him. "There's a want of consistency in your expressions;" and then she went up to Hunsden Park.

She found Geoffrey, as usual, in the morning room; he was teaching his dog a new trick, laying down a biscuit with an interdict. "Trust—paid for," said Geoffrey. Nest laughed softly. She had roses in her belt and in her cheeks, and one great one in her hands, and her dress was white. With her long pale hair and great shining eyes, she looked pretty, almost brilliant. Not for long, however.

Barbara leaned over her and kissed her, but her eyes were on Geoffrey.

"Why, how well you look, Nest! and what a colour you have! Norman said yesterday that you were strong enough to go home; and I believe he means to tell Lady Strath so."

"Did he say that?" asked Nest nervously. She was pulling the roses to pieces in her hands, and her face turned quite wan and grey. Geoffrey gave Barbara a queer look, and then he stooped over Nest, taking her hand quickly, almost fiercely: the poor fellow was crimson to his forehead. "You are not strong, Nest; you cannot go home yet. My mother shall speak to Lady Strath. I will not have you troubled in this way;" and he gave Barbara an angry glance. And this from easy-tempered Geoffrey!

Nest tried to smile in his face, but the effort was pitiable. "Oh, I must go, Sir Geoffrey, if my mother comes for me. Do you think she will to-day, Barbara?"

"No, not to-day," answered Barbara. She was watching them as one fascinated.

"One day more, then," cried Nest, with a little quiver. "Oh, I have been so happy here! Lady Hunsden has been so good to me; and—and——" And here, weak and ill as she was, she broke down.

"Don't do that," said Geoffrey, with a great break in his voice—"don't, Nest;" but Barbara pushed past him, and took Nest in her arms.

"Go and fetch her some wine," said Barbara cheerfully. "I spoke too hastily, and she feels weak, and, like all invalids, she cannot bear the thought of being moved. There, don't cry any more, you spoiled child;" and she hushed Nest with a bright womanliness that was quaint in Barbara. It worked wonders. Nest ceased the weak sobbing, and lay quite still; only, it pained Barbara to see how like a broken lily she looked all the rest of the day.

And Sir Geoffrey—well, he never removed his eyes from her; and there was a sullen look on the man's face that frightened Barbara; but she would not seem to notice it. So she did her part, laughed, and chatted, and read, till the time came for her to return home, and then she summoned him to attend her. "Come, Geoffrey, come; you know Hester expects us."

"But don't you think, Barbara, that—can't you tell her that I will come to-morrow?"

"No, indeed," returned Barbara hastily. "What in the world are you thinking about, Geoffrey? I won't stir a step without you. Excuses, indeed!"

"Do go," said Nest timidly; and he rose immediately. But, if it had been left for him, they would have had a silent walk home. Nothing was further from Barbara's intention, however; so she attacked him the instant they left the house.

"Do you like stories, Geoffrey?"

"Stories! Humph—yes. I liked that one you were reading to-day."

"Oh! I was not thinking about that. I am reading another book just now, Geoffrey, with such a funny plot. I don't know that it is particularly clever. It is exciting though, rather; and, what makes it more interesting, it is drawn from the life."

"What's it called?" asked Geoffrey, with indifference.

"'Cross Purposes,'" returned Barbara promptly. "It's a puzzling sort of book, too."

"Is it long?" he asked, in the same tone, and endeavouring to suppress a yawn.

"Well, no, I don't suppose you would call it long; but then I am only in the middle of the second volume. The hero is very well drawn. He is a good sort of man, without much brains; but the author or authoress, whichever it is, has made rather a mistake. He is evidently intended for a very virtuous sort of person—goody-good, as the children say,—and he is an awful hypocrite."

"Is he? Dear now, how very droll, Barbara. It can't be a nice book, I should think." Geoffrey was trying to rouse himself, and take a polite interest.

"Oh yes, it is," returned Barbara quickly, "a very nice book, only rather tiresome. Hester, there, can't read it; but, then, Hester was always slow—I mean, particular. I was going to tell you about the plot. The hero reminds me so of you, Geoffrey." Geoffrey was watching his dogs, and did not answer.

"He was fond of sports and all that, and was very rich; and he got engaged to a beautiful girl, very much below him in rank, and quite penniless. But still she was so good and beautiful," continued Barbara warmly, "that she might have married a prince."

Geoffrey brought his attention to bear on this part of the subject. "Then I suppose they married and lived very happily ever afterwards," he said, laughing nervously.

"Oh! no," exclaimed Barbara quickly. "You remember I am only in the middle of the second volume, and affairs are getting rather complicated just now. I don't think they will marry after all."

"Not marry, Barbara?"

"No; that is just the point. You see he did not love her. Oh! I forgot I have not told you that yet. Well, but you can see all through he does not love her. He thinks her beautiful and good, and all that; but he does not want to make her his wife."

"But that is not very natural," observed Geoffrey shrewdly. "I think it a stupid book, Barbara."

"Well, so do I," she admitted frankly, "a very stupid book, Geoffrey Hunsden, and a pack of lies; but there, let me get on. This goody-good hypocrite, in reality, loves another girl, but he has not the honesty to tell either her or his betrothed; and so I foresee, if no lady helps him, they will all three be made miserable. This other girl is far inferior to his betrothed in everything but goodness. She is little, and plain, and sickly," here Sir Geoffrey started, "and rather—crooked, you know; and the man must be bewitched to leave the other one for her; but he can see no fault in her,—a sure sign of love," argued Barbara sagaciously. She could not catch a glimpse of his face now, it was so averted. "The sister of his betrothed," continued Barbara, after a little pause, "saw how it was, and pitied him from her heart. She hated lies, did this

sister, and deceit and hypocrisy, and all that ; and so she made up her mind that if no one else would speak the truth she would ; and so she told him what I am telling you, Geoffrey." And here Barbara broke down altogether, and clasped his arm with a little sob.

No answer : he only strode on faster, striking his knotted stick on the ground fiercely. But those long-drawn breaths, what did they signify ?

"You are not angry, Geoffrey ? Don't be angry with poor little Bab."

He turned round and faced her immediately, and then indeed she was startled. The veins of his forehead were swollen like thick cords, and his ruddy face was quite pale.

"I am not very clever, Barbara. You hit me off well there—your hero with not much brains ; but I think I see the drift of your story."

"And you are not vexed, Geoffrey ?"

"Vexed !—pooh, nonsense ! A man who is as miserable as I am has no reason to be vexed with trifles."

"Why need you be miserable ? Oh, Geoffrey ! dear old Geoffrey ! I do so want to help you. Why need you be miserable ?"

He looked at her in a bewildered sort of way. "Don't you understand ? I thought you did from your story. Surely, if I love Nest, it must make me miserable to marry Hester."

"You shall not marry our Hester," said Barbara proudly. And then checking herself, "But are you sure—are you very sure, Geoffrey, that you do love Nest ?"

"Quite sure," he returned, in a manly decided way, that she had never seen in him before ; and, indeed, the whole man seemed changed. "It may seem queer and unnatural to you, Barbara—it would to me in any other fellow—that I should care for any girl when I have a chance with Hester ; and, 'pon honour, she's a beautiful creature and no mistake. But I can only say that it is so."

"But why ?" persisted Barbara curiously. She wanted to solve this most inexplicable problem sorely. "After all it may be only a fancy." He shook his head.

"I don't understand it, 'pon honour, Barbara. I always admired Hester, and all that, and thought I was fond of her ; but a man shouldn't be afraid of the woman he is going to marry."

"Of course not. What an absurd idea ! Why ever should you be afraid of Hester ?"

"I don't know. She seems so much above me ; I always feel like a schoolboy in her presence."

"Well done, Geoffrey!" and Barbara could hardly forbear clapping her hands.

"I am never afraid of Nest," he went on sadly, and softening his big voice. "Though she is like a saint in goodness, she never makes one feel abashed ; she is so little, and tender, and weak. Such a young thing, and so unhappy ! Barbara, I don't think any mischief would have been done but for those visits to St. Ronans."

"How do you mean?" asked Barbara. She was painfully trying to adapt her trot to his monstrous strides. She found out at last two and a half steps would just do it ; but it interrupted her rather, and distracted her attention. But Geoffrey's tongue, once thoroughly loosed, went on ; the big cords were not quite so tight now.

"Why, you see I found out there how lonely the dear little thing was, and how her mother put upon her. Now I never could stand oppression—never ; it makes me mad. I thought I only felt pity for her, and all that, and that I was true to Hester ; and all the while she was creeping into my heart. It is such a timid gentle little bird, Barbara ; but I want to protect it, and take it home." His voice was quite hoarse. The rough outer nature of the man had dropped off like a husk ; and what a good kindly heart was beneath it ! Barbara felt genuine respect and affection for him.

"You're a noble creature, Geoffrey."

"And yet you called me a hypocrite just now."

Barbara winced. Somehow her speeches never sounded so well from any other mouth as from her own.

"Only as long as you refuse to tell the truth. It is cowardly to keep it back ; mean, dishonourable to Hester."

"What am I to do ?" he said hopelessly. "My mother has talked me into it, and now it is too late. I cannot go back from my word."

"Perhaps not," returned Barbara haughtily. "You must put the true state of the case before Hester, and if she be willing to marry you, of course she must do so ; but to tell you a bit of my mind," continued Bab frankly, "I think she would rather cut her throat first than so demean herself ; and if she wouldn't, I would do it for her, and with pleasure," nodding fiercely.

"She will be awfully angry. It's all very well to tell me

to do it ; but how am I to screw up my courage ?" and Sir Geoffrey looked about as miserable as a man could look.

"Well, you see that's your affair. I don't mean to be unfeeling, Geoffrey ; but you've got yourself into this scrape, and you owe it to Nest to get her and yourself out of it as quickly as you can. I don't think I can help you there, because, though Nest is my friend, Hester is my sister."

It was very odd that Barbara always spoke of Geoffrey's affection for Nest, and never seemed to question Nest's for Geoffrey. She seemed to guess, intuitively, that there could be no doubt of that. Geoffrey, on his side, already assumed it as a fact.

Barbara's dignified speech acted like a spur, however.

"I beg your pardon, Barbara. Of course I see ; only I'm such a slow fellow. I must think over this, and see what is best to be done. You won't mind my turning back, will you ? I don't feel I can talk any more."

"But what am I to say to Hester ?" exclaimed Barbara. She was rather alarmed at the success of her manoeuvres, but very proud of it too. "She expects you, Geoffrey, and it will look so funny my going in without you."

"Tell her I will look in later in the evening. Yes, that will do ; but how on earth ?" he muttered, and then turned on his heel abruptly. Barbara stood and watched him till he was out of sight.

"Poor Geoffrey !" she observed to herself, "you are in a nice scrape. I wonder what Hester will think of her poor little rival."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CROSS CROWNED.

“ My soul is like a fragile flower,
Whose cup the sky so full has filled
With dew, that earthwards it must lower
Its head, till half the wealth is spilled.

“ Thus hast thou showered on me, my heaven,
Such glorious bliss without alloy ;
My heart, it bends 'neath bounty given,
And overbrims in tears of joy.”

CLAUDE LAKE.

BARBARA felt quite a heroine when she returned home. Heroines always get involved in a great many difficulties, she thought, and are always extricating themselves and other people in a most marvellous way. She felt very uncomfortable, of course ; but then, no doubt, other heroines felt themselves uncomfortable too. An inconvenient notion seized her, that Hester might not be specially grateful to her for her interference. “ Small meddlings are dangerous things,” sighed Bab, coining a new proverb for the occasion ; but she was very much inflated for all that,—a feeling, by the bye, that she lost the moment she found herself in Hester's presence. Hester looked up, and greeted her quite brightly when she entered. She was working, as usual, in her favourite place by the open window ; and though she confessed to some little disappointment at not seeing Geoffrey with her, she admitted the stammered out excuse very amiably. “ Engaged ! what has kept him, I wonder ? Well, never mind, if he be coming by and bye,” she said cheerfully. “ Sit down, Barbara—how hot and tired you look, child—and tell me if you have had a pleasant day.”

“ That depends on what you call pleasant,” returned Barbara shortly ; “ the first part was tolerable ;” and then she sat down all of a heap, as usual, and wrinkled her forehead frightfully. In such moods she was not handsome ; her detractors would have gone so far as to call her plain. No one need have envied Barbara her nice easy-chair, softly padded as it was, and with springs. She was sitting literally on thorns, eyeing Hester askance with troubled eyes. “ How very cheerful she is,” groaned poor Bab ; “ so very cheerful—talkative too. I wish

I were out of this ;” and she felt like a conspirator plotting against her sister’s happiness. Could ever any of her defunct heroines have felt so very uncomfortable ?

“You are tired, Barbara,” repeated Hester pleasantly, as she folded up her work and laid it aside. Bab cleared her throat and said “Yes,” and then nodded half-a-dozen times with no particular purpose. Hester’s hands remained inactive ; she seemed thinking, turning something over in her mind with quiet gravity.

“Where is Connie ?” asked Barbara restlessly. She did not like talking, but it was worse to be silent.

“Connie is spending the evening at the Ruperts’. They sent in for her, quite suddenly ; a little tea-party on the lawn. They wanted you too, Barbara.”

“Oh,” said Barbara ; and then again there was silence.

“Yes, she was so pleased to go, dear little thing ; but, Barbara, now we are alone together, I want to speak to you about something that has been on my mind lately. You remember the talk we had that night ?” she continued, hesitating.

“What talk, Essie ?”

“Why, when you came to my room,” she returned ; “about Geoffrey ; and——”

“Oh yes, I understand. You are not going to talk about that,” exclaimed Barbara in infinite distress. “What I thought then I think now, and with tenfold more reason.”

Hester opened her grey eyes widely, too much astonished to speak. Barbara went on in desperation.

“I have not altered my mind a bit, Essie. I think it still a mistake, the one great mistake of your life. You will never be happy, never !” Hester looked a little offended.

“You are excited, Barbara ; you will not hear what I have to say. You found me in trouble that night, and I thought you might like to know that I am quite content now.” And then, as the natural sweetness of her disposition asserted itself, “I tell you this, because you spoke the truth to me in all kindness.”

“I am glad you are content,” replied Barbara with a sigh.

“Yes,” said Hester steadily, “I think I have done wisely. I know myself and my own nature. He is a good man, one whom I can respect, one whom I really like. I am sure he will make me happy.”

“Do you love him, Essie ?” and Barbara leant forward breathlessly for the answer. A flush crossed Hester’s fair face

for a moment, as though she half resented the question. She looked at Barbara doubtfully; her earnestness must have touched her, for her manner changed and softened.

"I am not marrying for love," she said quickly; "you know that as well as I, Barbara. Once I hoped I should; but now—now—it is impossible."

"Why impossible, Essie?"

"Hush, hush; that is not the question. We were speaking of Geoffrey just now, were we not? Yes, I am sure I am right, Barbara, sure for myself that is to say, it is my notion that all women ought to marry. Where are we to get our standing, our power, unless we do?" She paused a moment, and went on rapidly: "It is all so narrow here, as I have said before. As Geoffrey's wife, I shall have scope for my energies; a place, power, and plenty of material for good. Yes, yes, it is right for me: it is right for him too. I shall help him to do his duty, as he has never done it yet."

Barbara, with her listening face, never moved, never took her eyes off her sister. Strong dissent was stamped on every feature; but for once she was silent. "What am I to say to her," groaned Barbara. "Oh, what blind fools we are; she must have her talk out; but I dare not answer her, or I shall be telling my story over again."

"I was very unhappy that night," continued Hester. "I felt as you did, that such a life would not suit me; but I am more content now. I have grown to esteem Geoffrey; I understand him. When I am his wife, and we are working together, I think I shall feel less lonely than I do here. My life will be fuller, more active, less confined; and who knows"—But here Hester did not finish her sentence, but in the depths of her passionate but reticent nature, she was saying: "Who knows, whether God may be good to me or not, and in future years I may have a child, a son, for my very own, on whom to set my heart and hopes, something that I may love before I die." How many another woman, from the hidden depths of her heart, has prayed that same prayer!

Barbara still sat, chin in hand, and watched her with unwinking eyes; but her whole nature rose up in secret rebellion against the cold clear statement of Hester's views. What a strong hard face it was, despite its beauty! What firmly-closed lips! What a massively cleft chin! What power on the low broad forehead! Bab thought of Nest's tears and flushes, her innocent betrayals of her love in every word, and then she grew mutinous.

"I don't like that working view of marriage," she said indignantly. "I would rather scrub floors than think as you do. If you had something to gain from marrying him—for the sake of your family for example—some grand piece of self-renunciation, that should out-do Jephtha's daughter and Iphigenia, I could understand it; but——"

"There, we won't talk of it any more," said Hester, with a little dignity. "You and I are never likely to agree on this subject, and I have taken my course. How late Geoffrey is; he promised to bring the plans for the new house. I want some alterations in the left wing. By the bye, Barbara, you know we have fixed our wedding-day."

"I know no such thing," returned Barbara, with a startled face.

"New Year's Day. Lady Hunsden wished it before then, but I said no, I would take up my new life and my new duties with the first day of the year; it is my birthday, too."

"Oh, for gracious sake, don't talk any more," cried Barbara, and she fairly rushed away. It was not dignified in a heroine. She ought to have sat it out, with tightly-interlaced fingers and quivering nerves, in the orthodox manner, instead of jumping up, slamming the door, and stamping up to her own room in that outlandish fashion. A more absurd little image than Barbara looked could not be found anywhere, as she sat in the middle of her den, tucked up on the floor, pushing her hot fingers through her hair, and talking to herself. She even stopped her ears, as she always did when Connie was in the dentist chair; under a sort of unconscious impression that something—she did not know what—was happening downstairs. "Stuff and rubbish," she called out quite loud, when she had settled herself to her own liking. "I can understand any one talking crazily when they are in love, but to argue out everything in this lawyer-like fashion, just as though she were only establishing a clothing club, maternity meeting, or washer-women's class! I declare I have no patience with it."

She repeated this sentence in various forms, much to Ben's alarm, for he stood by her in a stricken manner, feebly apologising with lollèd-out tongue. And then she felt dull, and perched up on the window-seat for a bit. It grew dark presently, at least dusk—sweet summer dusk. She was tired of nearly breaking her neck with trying to reach a piece of jasmine that provoked her into longing for it. "There is plenty more outside the drawing-room window," she said at

last, grumbling, and she went downstairs in a slipshod guilty manner, and, forgetting all about her errand, walked quietly into the Harlequin room. She was standing staring at them both before she recollected herself.

The lamp was on the table, but Hester was not working beside it. She was standing by the window, with averted face, when Barbara came in; and Geoffrey was near her. He had the same scared paleness when he turned round as when Bab saw him last; in his heavy way he was suffering terribly. Bab saw it all, and then she prepared to retreat.

"Barbara, come here!" The harsh tones were Hester's, but only harsh with pain.

Barbara folded her hands behind her and came forward reluctantly. "I did not mean to interrupt you and Geoffrey," she pleaded apologetically.

Hester gave a gesture of impatience. "Never mind the interruption, Barbara; I wish to speak to you. Sir Geoffrey tells me that I am indebted to you for all this pleasant truth; is it so?"

Barbara stood like Ben, in stricken silence.

"You must answer me," continued Hester quickly. "I am not angry, Barbara. God only knows from what you have saved me—from what a miserable fate, to which my own blindness was hurrying me. I thank you, do you hear? I thank you for what you have done."

There was anger and outraged feeling in her voice—the keen suffering of a proud and slighted woman; but that was all. It gave Barbara courage.

"Be angry with me, Essie; I shall not mind it in the least, and it will do you good. I know I have done nothing wrong; but that does not matter. I only told Geoffrey, as I told you, that he was making a mistake. I was not going to stand by," continued Bab with dignity, "and see him about to marry you, Essie, when he liked another girl better."

"Did I not say just now, I thanked you, Barbara; why waste words? You have saved us both from lifelong misery; and is not that a cause for gratitude? Sir Geoffrey, I think we have finished our conversation. I need not detain you further. Remember, you have your full liberty; I have already released you. Miss Strath has more claims on your time now than I." She spoke bitterly, but her position was humiliating—to such a woman as Hester it was intolerable.

"Is this all you can say to me, Hester?" cried Geoffrey.

Poor fellow, how he was suffering. "I have treated you badly; but how can a man answer for himself for two years? I wanted you to marry me before, 'pon honour, I did; but you would not." Then in his straightforward manly way—"I have offered over and over again to keep my word to you, and to try and forget everything but that you are my plighted wife. It is not too late, Hester, if you will only forgive me." And so great was his pain that he meant, for the moment, what he said; but Hester turned from him with a movement of disdain.

He came up a little closer. "At least wish me God speed. I will not leave you like this, Hester, who have been my true friend for so long. No, not until you tell me that you forgive me." And he held out his honest hand to her.

Then her pride gave way. Whatever tenderness she felt for the man found utterance now.

"I have nothing to forgive," she said hurriedly. "It was I who was in fault. I who should ask to be forgiven. But I was just beginning to like you, Geoffrey. I thought it would all come right; there, go and make Nest happy, for she at least is innocent."

"Promise me that we shall always be friends, Hester," pleaded Geoffrey, and for the first time for many and many a long month he looked tenderly into her beautiful face.

"Yes, I shall always be your friend; always, do you hear, Geoffrey! There, good-bye; God bless you." Tears sprang to her eyes. "Tell Nest from me, she must make you happy;" and then she quietly moved away, and left him. She had borne herself with what dignity she might, but she could bear it no longer. She had been so sure of him—had built so largely on her future life—that she could scarcely now believe that anything so intolerable had happened to her.

And yet, perhaps, it was the happiest thing that could have befallen Hester, for it struck at the stony foundations of her proud and self-reliant nature, upon which she had proposed to herself to build a superstructure of works and vainglory for the rest of her life. Now her ambition had got a fatal blow; she had been wounded in a woman's most vulnerable part—that of believing herself beloved—she was to learn that all her hopes, all her intentions—however purely good they might have been—were yet leavened with unlawful leaven, and doomed to be ruthlessly destroyed.

For however desirable it may be to work out good with a clean heart, yet we shall all of us find out one day, that self-

imposed duties—undertaken in a wrong spirit, stained with unworthy motives—or wrought only for our own ends, must fail of the promised blessing ; must bring to their doers but a curse, a curse of briars and thorns, disappointment, and the rank weeds of humiliation ; seeing that we have not wholly eschewed evil, while cleaving to that which is good.

And so in the stately plan of life which Hester had mapped out for herself—"thus and thus will I do"—was there a conscious flaw that marred it all, the plague-spot of pride,—pride that refused to accept such a narrow way in life, that would do greater and greater deeds, to shine in the eyes of men. Ah ! as time went on, and added cares and troubles came upon her, Hester grew to look upon her past ambition as a sin ; when she owned to herself that she had fallen from her woman's integrity, and cast a slur upon the glory of her youth ; and when all her better nature awoke in its nobility and truth, and the heart of the little child was given to her, and people loved her faded beauty as they had never loved it in its prime. Ah ! who that had known her in the days of her brief summer of content, when Arthur Mayhew came to the old house, or, afterwards, during the long strange wooing of Geoffrey Hunsden, would have recognised Hester Heathcote in the gentle grey-haired woman, whom to know was to love, and whose sweet empire was so boundless over youth and youth's belongings, that it seemed well-nigh marvellous. In later life, when asked by one who had known her how she could so patiently acquiesce in the fate of loneliness that was decreed to her, and especially in that which is so often the hardest trial to the unmarried woman—the knowledge that the blessing which is not denied to the peasant woman is denied to them—Hester made answer with a tranquil smile, "God knows that I love children so, that He has given me not one or two, but hundreds. You would smile if you knew how many call me mother, and whom I love as my own." And then, with the sweetness and tenderness that came to her in her later life, "Seeing, therefore, that I am blessed with universal motherhood, how can I be ungrateful for myself, or you for me." Such are the contradictions of human nature—such the several changes evolved by troubles that seem at first only to provoke a chaos, till, under the transforming Hand, the struggling elements of the soul find natural bounds and outlets. Ah !—tread reverently here, for this is holy ground—how many a "peace, be still" of the great Tranquilliser, and, lo ! the fretful proudly misgoverned youth—so often rudderless on tempestuous seas—suddenly finds

itself, after many storms, in the still waters of a strange haven, not such a haven as we would choose, may be,—not the one for which we had planned and striven, but surely the one that is best and safest for us—a God-fearing, steadfast, middle age ; if without hope, yet certainly without fear.

The time was long in coming to Hester, but it came at last. At first, as was natural, she brooded over her changed prospects in a gloomy pride that admitted no possibility of sympathy ; pity you could not have offered to her. Her father's fierce anger with Geoffrey, Barbara's warm partisanship, Connie's caresses—generally so soothing, seemed alike to her. She neither responded nor rebuked : she would have nothing to say on the subject—nothing.

No one had ever seen Dr. Heathcote so angry before, except once, when Leigh's disgrace was first known ; the gentlest of men as he was, he was not devoid of weakness, and perhaps a lurking ambition to see his Hester well married was one of them. As we have said before, he alone knew, or rather guessed, at her old secret ; and he had hailed her engagement with Geoffrey as promising the best prospect for her eventual happiness. That he was a baronet, well looking, and well-endowed with everything but cleverness, of course added greatly to the advantage of the match ; and as the more he knew of him the better he liked him—and already he was beginning to regard him in some measure as his son—so was the corresponding disappointment when Hester informed him that the engagement was over between them, and that he would always have her with him now, as she would never marry. Heathcote House was not a very pleasant abode just now, under the influence of the doctor's wrath ; in the first place, being so very rare, it had the effect of a moral earthquake. "When Daddy is angry, you never know where you are," as Barbara remarked candidly. But there was another cause for the doctor's perturbation than appeared at first sight—but more of that presently ; and then, secondly, his anger being a disused and singularly awkward weapon, and not very well wielded by its owner, it was sure to light on the wrong person ; and Geoffrey not being in the way, seeing he had forbidden him the house, and Barbara always before him standing well on her defence, it so happened that she had rather a hard life of it, being well beset by the doctor's missiles, which were flung about on all occasions, and which she bore with argumentative cheerfulness, and a thorough good-humoured intention of standing in the breach as long as he wanted her. "Bravo !

Bab," Leigh would say, day after day, "what's up between the Governor and you, and what's become of the sulks?" and Barbara would answer half shrewdly and half comically: "It makes him sore, Leigh, to see Hester moving about like a statue, and looking so cold and proud at him—he wants her to wake up and make him forget all about it; and he feels cross and testy and bitter, and so he has a hit at Bab." She used to say sometimes to him of a night, "You have been very cross all day, Daddy, have you not?"

"I am afraid I have, Bab," he would answer, looking reluctantly at her, and stroking his grey beard.

"Well, Bab forgives you, only don't go and do it again till the next time, unless——" and then she would come near him, and look at him with her great eyes very softly.

"Unless what, my Barbara?"

"Unless you want to be hugged to death by a little brown bear," she would reply; and after that she always had her way with him. But, in spite of her fun, she carried a very grave face to the studio of a morning.

Nest was back at St. Ronans now. She had bidden a long adieu to her kind hostess. Sir Geoffrey was not there; he had gone off to Scotland for some shooting. She had had many a secret cry over his changed manner, and his cold "Good-bye, Miss Strath." He had hardly looked at her either when he shook hands. Could she have offended him? Was he angry with her? The poor little thing was nearly breaking her heart over this sudden leave-taking. She pined like some sickly plant, suddenly deprived of sunshine and air; her transient beauty was over. Lady Strath was heard to say more than once, that she never thought before that Nest was quite so plain. Then she grew anxious about her; the girl seemed to dwindle and droop more every day. Nest, shrinking from notice, said it was the fever, and prayed to be left alone. She wanted no one, not even Barbara. Barbara's health and spirits oppressed her. Ay, it was fever surely, the fever of hopeless love! Nest had her hot fits and her cold fits; her bitter thirstings and parched longings, longings for a voice whose joyous vitality was as a new life to her; for a strong hand and an honest face, which was speedily becoming all her world. She had no hope now. She knew the engagement was broken with Hester. Sunningford was ringing with the news, but she had no suspicion of the true cause. Geoffrey's quick leave-taking, his prolonged absence, and Lady Hunsden's grave face, all combined to make her believe that the

affair had given him great pain. Once, she had fancied, he did not like Hester ; now she was sure that he did : but for her secret stay, she would have utterly broken down ; but even with her entire resignation to what she believed a Higher Will, sleepless nights and disordered nerves were making her a wraith of herself. Barbara secretly mourned over her ; then she grew frightened. One night, after Nest had been talking very earnestly for hours about the joys of Paradise Barbara sat down and wrote a long letter to Geoffrey, and carried it herself to the post ; and what she said in it nobody knows to this day, except Geoffrey. Only, she did not seem at all surprised, as she was returning from Bex Hill an evening or two afterwards, to see him coming out of the lodge gates in his grey tweed shooting-coat, and his face looking as bronzed and healthy as even Geoffrey's could look. He came up to her at a swinging pace, and shook her hand till she called out with pain. "How is she, Barbara?"

And Barbara answered, wincing and looking at her red hand : "Oh dear, oh dear, you've crushed me in a vice, and reduced me to a jelly. Go along with you, do. What a hand you have got. Have you been among the Red Indians ? Where's your tomahawk?"

"But, Barbara——"

"Don't Barbara me ; you have hurt me dreadfully. There go along with you, take the first turning to the right, down by the bracken path ; go through the little gate where I found St. Ronans, and when you have walked a dozen paces, you will find a—Nest. She gave a little ridiculous laugh at that, and nodded meaningly. Geoffrey wanted to shake hands again, but she would not hear of it ; only, she condescended to walk with him to the gate itself.

"You have heard the news, I suppose?" she asked very gravely, as they parted. Yes, Geoffrey had heard the news, and he looked at her very pityingly.

"If I could only help you—if you only knew how I feel for you all,—tell your father so from me, Barbara."

"I dare not mention your name," said Barbara quickly. "Dear old Geoffrey ! I knew how sorry you would be for us. There, good-bye," and Barbara tripped off lightly as ever, but with a graver face than Barbara was ever known to wear before, for during Sir Geoffrey's absence strange things had come to light at Heathcote House.

Nest was sitting in the little green hollow Bab called her

pulpit. She saw him coming, and gave a great start of joy. Oh how glorious the sky was ! what a sunset ! what blue-black distances of firs ! how beautiful—how beautiful everything was ! Her hands worked in each other nervously ; her face was dyed with blushes, sparkling with joy. Only to see him—only to hear his voice was life and health to the poor child. He greeted her rather gravely for him, and sat down beside her ; his manner was the same as ever, only he did not release her hand.

“What have you been doing to yourself, Nest ? How thin—how weak you are.” And he looked at her tenderly, as a mother might at a sick child that she finds sadly altered after an absence from her. “What have you been doing with yourself, Nest ?”

“Nothing !” she answered, and shrank away a little, and then crept closer. “I am so glad you are back—so very glad !” and even in saying those few words her eyes were wet with shy happiness. Very child as she was, she could not hide it from him. It gave Geoffrey courage for his next speech.

“Do you know why I have come home, Nest ? I have come all the way from Scotland to ask you to be my wife. Nay, don't be afraid of me. You knew—you must have known all this time—that I loved you and not Hester. I am free now to marry whom I will, and I will marry no other woman but you.”

If he could only have seen her face ; but she covered it with her hands, and broke into pitiful sobs. “No, no !” she cried, in a tone of anguish that smote him to the heart. “Leave me now, Sir Geoffrey ; please leave me !”

“I will never leave you, Nest, till you have promised to be my wife.” Could that earnest pleading voice be Geoffrey's ! She took down her hands at that, and looked at him, with her pale face streaming with tears ; its utter misery would have moved a harder man than Geoffrey. “Oh, how good you are,” she gasped. “May Heaven bless you ; so good and true ; and to love me—me, but I will not be your wife !”

“Say rather that you will, sweet Nest.”

“Ah, how you tempt me ; it is all out of your great pity, Geoffrey—Sir Geoffrey, I mean—you think—” here her poor face grew scarlet—“you think—that I care for you, and am unhappy ; but I will not be unhappy any more. I cannot, when I remember what you have said to me ; I shall think of it all my life long, and be grateful to you.”

“You owe me no gratitude, dearest child.”

"Oh, I do," she answered simply; "think of your coming all this way to ask me this. Dear friend, dear good friend, I will pray for you, and love you all my life. But I must not be your wife."

"Why not, my darling?"

She broke again into tears at that, and whispered in her agony that God had afflicted her, and made her what she was, a poor deformed girl, as he must know—as he must surely know; and then again she pressed him to let go.

"Never," was all his answer, and his strong arms held her firmly to him as he kissed the little hands reverently, and then the long shining hair. "You are my own Nest—my very own; my poor little weak child, whom I mean to love and cherish all the days of my life."

And so the cross was taken from Nest, and the crown of a happy love was vouchsafed her.

Would Geoffrey ever repent his choice? Ask him in after years, when he was the blithest and heartiest of country squires, first and last in the hunting-field, and known as the greatest whip in the county, whether he would change his little pale-faced wife then—his childless, ailing wife? She was slightly deformed, this new Lady Hunsden, people said, but very charming: only, somehow they could never believe in her husband's devotion to her; so preposterous, you know, and all that. Sir Geoffrey knew better, and so did Nest. She knew she was the darling of his heart and the desire of his eyes. "My little Lady," he used to call her, "my little Lady," and hush his voice when he spoke of her. For this rough squire, in his clumsy fondness, treated her as a child, and revered her as a saint.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FÊTE AT HUNSDEN PARK.

" *	*	*	*	We went	
*	*	*	*	*	*
Down through the park ; strange was the sight to me ;					
For all the sloping pasture murmured, sown					
With happy faces and with holiday.					
*	*	*	*	*	*
*	*	*	*	*	*

A herd of boys with clamour bawl'd,
 And stumped the wicket ; babies rolled about
 Like tumbled fruit in grass ; and men and maids
 Arranged a country dance, and flew thro' light
 And shadow, while the twanging violin
 Struck up with 'Soldier-Laddie,' and overhead,
 The broad ambrosial aisles of lofty lime
 Made noise with bees and breeze from end to end."

TENNYSON'S *Princess*.

It is necessary to retrace our steps a little, a proceeding alike hateful in real life and fiction ; but Sir Geoffrey was still in Scotland and Nest not yet consoled, when a very strange thing happened at Heathcote House.

Yes, Sir Geoffrey is still in Scotland, and Lady Hunsden is fretting herself to death over her disappointment. Dr. Heathcote is cross, and Hester glooming terribly ! that is a grander and more refined synonym for sulking, but she is doing it in such a way as to make poor Barbara's heart ache.

Yes, Barbara has the heart ache, a new experience with her, who had never known pain, mental or bodily, all her life long, and whose sufferings had been of a purely imaginative and grandiloquent type ; she took to it kindly, however, like a kitten to drowning, with a sort of martyr-like strangled meekness, which made one wish she wouldn't, and all that ; she only wondered occasionally in her odd fashion, whether it would ever leave off aching again. Alas ! how many a true word is spoken in jest, Barbara, Barbara !

It was not aching to-day, though, of course not ; to-day was her birthday, and the school children's *fête* at Hunsden Park, and, be things as they might, she could not help feeling happy ; not but what there were a great many obstacles to her thorough enjoyment. Geoffrey was away, so there would not

be half so much fun with the children, and Dr. Heathcote had refused to set his foot in Hunsden Park again; and the lady-superintendent, Miss Heathcote, would be missing, and Nest was too ill to go, and now that tiresome Sydney Herbert had come back from the Lakes, and she must mount guard over foolish Connie like some old duenna; all these things were very vexatious, there was no doubt of that, but still Leigh would be there, and St. Ronans and Mrs. Strath, and Norman, of course—as though she would care for anything if Norman were not there.

So it came to pass that her mood was of the sunniest as she stood surveying herself on tiptoe, to get a good peep at herself in the drawing-room glass. Her father had given her a new dress, and such a dress, too, all white and soft, with wonderful blue veins streaking up and down it deliciously, and dainty little ruffles at throat and wrist; no marvel she was trying, and trying hard, too, to get a peep at herself. It was a pity Nigel Strath came in and found her at it though; all women like to look at themselves in the glass, unless they are specially ill-favoured, but it is not exactly pleasant to be discovered pirouetting before it on one foot! one turns round so, to catch a glimpse of the back of one's head, or so—pirouette number two.

"Why don't you set to partners, Barbara?" asks Nigel, with an odd twinkle. Barbara glances round at him, colours up, weapons bristling, sees a flat-looking parcel in his hand, and yields with honours of war.

"I am two-and-twenty to-day," says Bab, trying to look unconscious, "and Daddy has given me this new dress, isn't it lovely. Connie is obliged to wear her old white one, but then she's one of the teachers, so it doesn't matter, but she looks very nice," she added patronisingly. Connie pouts and shrugs her shoulders, she is secretly envious of the new dress, but she looks the picture of girlish prettiness notwithstanding, with her yellow curls, blue eyes, and satin skin; very pretty she is, and she knows it, but Barbara does not look amiss either; there is a bright individuality about her that asserts itself; one cannot pass over her, that is the fact, though one hardly knows whether to admire her or not. That Nigel admires her is evident; he stands by quite patiently while she settles her ruffles to her satisfaction, and the grey eyes take in every trick of her countenance. Barbara glances up at him once or twice, rather surprised.

"You look ill, St. Ronans, what is the matter with you?"

He gave an unsteady laugh.

"Pooh, nothing; only my old complaint again, sleeplessness and palpitations. It is always so when I get thinking or excited, it's chronic, I believe."

"Are you sure there is nothing more amiss," she asked nervously.

"Nothing more than usual, the hot weather tires me, and—and——" he hesitated. "I am afraid there's a little mischief going on in my hip again. I limp rather more than I did. I went up to London yesterday, just to pacify my mother; she wanted me to see one or two of the professional humbugs of fashion, and they all told me the same old tale—winter at Nice, perfect rest, entire relaxation, and freedom from all excitement." He laughed a low amused laugh, it was rather bitter though; "they forbid me even happy excitement, Barbara; just fancy, when I go to bed every night with dancing pulses, and beating of a dozen hammers, in my brain."

"Oh, St. Ronans!" cried Barbara, truly shocked—somehow she had never seen him look quite so delicate before.

"The biggest of the old humbugs, after he had patted and poked, and bullied me to his heart's content, was good enough to predict, that by following his prescriptions and keeping myself free from the unwholesome excitements of other mortals, I might enjoy a tolerably long existence—the existence of a cabbage, you understand; and he ended in a most fatherly way—he was an old admirer of the Madre's I believe—by putting his hands on my shoulders, and saying, that humanly speaking, my life was in my own keeping, I could do more for myself than a dozen physicians could."

"He is a wise man," returned Barbara, with the tears in her eyes; "you see," she continued in her shrewd way, "you don't know half the harm you do yourself when you get into one of your excitements: I declare you often terrify me, you look so strange; why can't you be always calm and tranquil as you are now? you have everything to make you happy."

"No, not everything Barbara; I want one thing more——" he had no time to finish his sentence, for Dr. Heathcote entered the room at this minute, followed by Leigh.

"Where's Connie?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Barbara, looking helplessly round; "she was here just now—dear me, I'm afraid she has started off for Hunsden by herself, and I particularly desired her to wait for me—how very tiresome of her."

"She went through that window while we were talking," said St. Ronans, laughing, "but she can't be farther than the gate, so we can easily overtake her."

"Hester will be very much annoyed," returned Dr. Heathcote gravely, "she particularly desired you not to lose sight of your sister to-day. We shall have that foolish young Herbert making love to her all the afternoon; it is very careless, very careless of you indeed, Barbara."

"Daddy!"

"Well."

"It's my birthday, Daddy, and it only comes once a year; don't be cross on Bab's birthday."

"Very well, I won't, Barbara; there, run along with you, you goose."

"One moment, doctor; I have not made my little offering on Barbara's *fête*-day—there, *ma petite*, that is from Bab's master."

Barbara's eyes became very round as she opened the case—but at sight of its contents she turned crimson, and snapped it close again in a trice.

"No, thank you, St. Ronans," she said decidedly; "it is very pretty, much too pretty, and you are very kind—but you must take it back."

"Take it back! nonsense, Barbara."

"Oh, you must indeed. Give it to Nest; it is just fit for her, but it is too costly for me. I can't keep it."

Her words were brusque, almost discourteous—but the fact was, Bab felt a little frightened.

"Oh, I can't keep it," she repeated, blushing hotly.

Nigel looked a little hurt, but he was not without cunning. He held out the case to the doctor.

"Look here, doctor, just settle this foolish point, will you? here, Barbara will not accept my little offering, because she says it is too costly—what nonsense! one would think it was diamonds, instead of a foreign trifle I picked up at Malta."

The doctor peered through his spectacles, and hemmed and hawed a little. He was evidently of Barbara's opinion. It was a small necklet of gold Maltese work, with a cross attached to it, and was dainty enough for a queen's neck.

"I am afraid it has cost a great deal," he said hesitatingly.

"My dear doctor, not a bit of it—a mere trifle, only Barbara here makes such a fuss about everything."

"You are sure you did not spend much money on it?"

"Positively nothing ; why I should be ashamed to tell you the price." Nigel said this with a mischievous twinkle, that proved he was not speaking exactly the truth.

"Don't believe him, Daddy," said Barbara stubbornly.

"Oh, as to you," went on Nigel, wheeling suddenly round on her ; "I only tell you this : if you won't accept my necklace—yes, and wear it too—I will never give you another painting lesson as long as I live."

He seemed very much in earnest, and Barbara was obliged to submit. She stretched out her hand reluctantly to her father for the case, but Nigel took out the delicate filigree chain, and clasped it round her neck. He looked radiant.

"Does it not go well with her new dress, doctor ? Why don't you have another peep at yourself, Barbara ?"

But Barbara was shy, and would not ; still it was not in the girl's nature not to be pleased with her first ornament. Nigel saw her fingering it proudly afterwards, and felt quite content.

"Thank you, St. Ronans," was all she said ; "and now I think we will follow Connie."

Leigh, who had been standing yawning drearily over this little scene, turned round with alacrity at this, and seconded the motion. There was another delay, however—for, just outside the garden door they met Norman, evidently bound for Heathcote House. He came up smiling.

"I was only going to bring you these flowers, Barbara," he said, putting a small bouquet into her hand ; "my mother also has sent you a trifle—you see we have not forgotten it is your birthday."

"No, indeed," returned Barbara, delighted ; "how good of her and you, too, Norman ; why, you have cut all your favourite ferns for me."

"Well, what if I have ?" he answered, watching her pleased face—then, as he caught the glitter of her necklace, "Why, how smart you are to-day, Barbara ! Did the doctor give you that grand necklace ?"

"No, your cousin—I mean St. Ronans," she said stammering, and feeling rather foolish, she did not know why, but she wished so now that he had not given it—she was afraid Norman might be displeased.

"Oh !" returned Dr. Strath ; "well, good - bye, I must speak to the doctor."

She could not tell what the queer expression on his face meant, or whether he was angry, but the "oh !" damped the rest of the day.

"I think we shall have a storm presently," said St. Ronans, as they skirted the highroad.

"I hope so ; I like storms of all things," was Barbara's answer. "Thunder and lightning and rain—and plenty of it—only I don't want the school-children to get wet," and then she lapsed into a steady silence.

Hunsden Park was not much of a place, as Nigel had truly observed : an uneven space of broken-down fields, more prolific of hillocks and grassed-over ditches than trees ; but still the green turf was very pleasant after the dusty roads—and with the white tents, streaming banners, and groups of neatly-dressed children and teachers, it presented quite a festive scene—especially when the village band struck up in all its brazen pride, as it marched solemnly under the great triumphal arch, to the tune of "The girl I left behind me." This annual *fête* at Hunsden was quite a gala-day in the village, not only to the children, but to their parents and relatives also. Not a human being, and hardly a dog in Sunningford that did not put in an appearance that day—unless it were Jabez Stokes, the old cobbler, who used to stand and growl in his doorway, flinging sour words after every blithe lad and lass that had the misfortune to pass his way. No, Jabez and his dog never went ; but then Jabez was half cracked—wanting, as his neighbours said,—and the dog was blind, or next door to it, and so perhaps their loss was not so great after all.

The Heathcote party were rather late ; nearly the whole village was there when they arrived. Lady Hunsden sat in the entrance of one of the tents, in the midst of a group of ladies—every now and then speaking a kindly word or two to some of the hard-working mothers as they passed her. One of the teachers, Henry Rupert, was showing off conjuring tricks in another tent to a little crowd of open-mouthed lads. Another small crowd were herded together, in orderly ranks, before a "Punch and Judy" show ; the performance had not yet begun, and the showmen were lolling against a cart ; a handsome curly-eared "Toby" barked and capered amongst the children ; there was kiss-in-the-ring going on in a green hollow, and just by the gate a knot of eager boys were gathered round a pale-faced consumptive-looking teacher, bent hotly on a paper-chase. Grass, trees, sunshine, bright faces, and summer dresses made up a pretty picture between them. Barbara shook off her moody fit, and entered into the spirit of it in a moment. She picked up a small fat boy who had rolled down into a ditch somehow, and

was sitting helplessly at the bottom, feeling forsaken by man, and making up his mind for a howl; a little black dog was looking down at him rather facetiously, with his head well cocked on one side. Barbara restored him to the level of humanity again—when he trotted off, in company with his canine friend, in pursuit of a great black-faced sheep—that was evidently the attraction of the day to him; the sheep, by the bye, were the only things that did not seem to enjoy themselves—they had got themselves well against the orchard wall, and appeared to object strongly to this fusion of classes. Ruth was sitting under the elm-trees, with Miss Vokes—they seemed to have formed an impromptu nursery between them for all the young things of the village—babies in arms and out of arms, toddling wee children, a lame boy, three or four dejected-looking puppies, and a hunchbacked girl.

“We want the poor mothers to have a real holiday,” said Ruth, in answer to their amused questioning. Her white dress was creased and she looked hot and tired; but, as Barbara said afterwards, what a dear beautiful face it was!

“No one knows what a holiday it is to some of them to have nothing to hold,” said Miss Vokes, nodding.

She wore a grass-green silk gown and her Leghorn bonnet was resplendent with primrose ribbons, her little grey curls bobbed over her faded cheeks; she looked like a withered old spring flower run to seed, and very much out of season; her green gloves had old cracks and rents in them. Barbara eyed her satirically.

“Miss Vokes, you’re an angel,” said Leigh, with a laugh and a bow. “Those babies look like white serpents in their long clothes. Do they like lying on their backs?”

Like it! I should think they did. Never was there such a beating of worsted shoes, such splutterings of “coo—coo.”

Leigh looked a little puzzled. “Are you going to do nursery work all this lovely afternoon,” he said in a low voice to Ruth; “they want you in the orchard, I think.”

“My place is here,” she returned with lowered eyes. “Drive those sheep away, please; they frighten the babies.”

“Oh, there’s Connie,” cried Barbara, and she hurried off to scold her for her desertion.

Connie was not going to be scolded; she grew mischievous, threw up her head and laughed, very shyly, however. Sydney Herbert hoped that they had not been wanted; he had taken great care of her sister; he would not let her tire herself with

the children ; they had been sitting ever so long in the shade. Could he fetch Barbara anything ?

Barbara gave a great shrug of her shoulders ; it was no good, where Connie was, Sydney would be ; she was not going to have him dangling after her all the evening, so she washed her hands of them ; it was not her fault, and so on. That was Barbara's method of getting rid of a responsibility.

She joined the party at the Punch and Judy show, sat in the front boxes, in fact, and enjoyed it very much ; then she did a little cricket with two very small boys—one boy bowled endlessly, and said every time "the wicket's down," in a tone of proud delight, when it wasn't ; the other batted fiercely, and generally hit nothing. Barbara grew tired of being long-stop to these uninteresting lads, so she proposed ginger-pop, and a change of employment. They drank it in a rakish manner without their jackets, bat in hand, and said : "What is the score, Umpire ?" and then proposed kiss-in-the-ring. Barbara looked at their hot dirty faces, and said no. "I would rather have 'Touch who I can,' " and took to her heels.

They bounded after her at once, with the true war-whoop, but she was bent on losing them. She had some trouble, though, and Nigel found her, in consequence, in the last place he expected, among the ladies in the grand tent. She beckoned to him ecstatically.

"Look here, St. Ronans, they are going to have tea in the orchard—not the children, of course, but the gentlefolk and teachers ; they will have lots of little tables, as they had last year, and every one will make up their own party."

"Where's the orchard ?" asked Nigel, looking round the Park.

"Why, there. Don't you see where the sheep are, near Ruth's nursery ?—but you need not cross all that sunny park to get to it ; go round the house, and through the flower garden ; it joins the ugly old kitchen-garden of which Lady Hunsden is so fond."

"Well, what am I to do there ?" he asked, smiling at her bright eager face.

"Why, secure a table, of course. There's Connie and Leigh, and Sydney Herbert, oh, and Harry Rupert will want to come too ; he is another admirer of Connie's, and you—and"—she broke off, as she saw Dr. Strath's square shoulders pushing through the crowd. She was still looking at him, when Nigel returned.

"All right. I have got a nice little round table that will hold six."

"Six; oh that won't do at all—it must hold seven. Go back again, St. Ronans, or you will spoil it all."

He looked rather surprised, but he had instituted himself as her squire of the day, so he obediently fulfilled her behests, and just in time, as he informed her triumphantly, for Katie Rupert wanted it for their party, and he had much ado to settle it.

"Never mind, so that you've done it," said Barbara contentedly; and then she stood in the entrance to the tent and watched the children ranging themselves under the trees, while great cans of tea and trays full of piled-up cakes and buns made their appearance, like magic, from the central tent. Grace was said, every child held out its clean mug, and the great business of the day was transacted.

When all the children were satisfied, and not before, deputy teachers were appointed, and the signal was given for adjourning to the orchard. Connie had already disappeared; they found her under the mossy apple-trees, presiding at a tea-tray and looking like a Dresden shepherdess. It was a very pretty scene; the dozen little tables, each with its snowy drapery, and pyramid of fruit and flowers, set under the low fruit-trees; sunset clouds, green grass, bright girlish faces, distant music in the park, the happy voices of children.

"Come, Barbara, why are you waiting?" cried Connie. She had tucked up her white dress, her hair was uncurled with heat and excitement, and her blue eyes were sparkling like sapphires. Sydney Herbert was on one side, Harry Rupert on the other, Nigel had slipped into the vacant seat by Barbara.

"Come, Barbara," he chimed in a little impatiently, "I left Leigh in the Park; it is no use waiting for him."

Barbara heard neither of them; she still stood up, stretching her neck and peering eagerly among the different tables. "Ah, there he is," she said at last, with a little sigh of relief, as Dr. Strath appeared, and she beckoned to him smilingly, and pointed to an empty chair. He saw her—she was certain he saw her—for he nodded rather gravely as he scanned their party, and then he passed on; she saw him seat himself at the little table behind them, with Lady Hunsden's plum-coloured brocade on one side, and Miss Vokes' green silk on the other, and Mrs. Rupert's bird of Paradise nodding opposite to him. Nigel looked rather triumphant.

"It is no use waiting any longer," he said softly; and Bar-

bara subsided into her chair with a discomfited face, her birthday *fête* was spoilt. Leigh came up by and by, and brought Ruth with him. The little party was gay enough; people turned round to look at them, and then nodded to each other meaningly. Connie's little love idyll was apparent enough to all eyes.

Barbara alone remained silent and subdued, her fading flowers beside her; she could hear every word Dr. Strath was saying behind her. Now and then she grew fretful over Connie's nonsense. Nigel was very quiet, but somehow he irritated her too; it was quite a relief when people pushed their chairs away, and walked up and down chattering and laughing. The band was tuning up again in the Park; there would be dancing by and by. Lady Hunsden always set her young people to dance. Connie shook out her curls coquettishly; she had accepted flowers from both her swains. Sydney looked a little sulky. "You must dance the first quadrille with me," Barbara could hear him say, and then some one trod upon her dress—a heavy foot, Dr. Strath's, she knew it well—she turned round upon him, holding up the rent playfully.

"How very clumsy of me," he said, in a tone of regret, "your pretty new dress, Barbara; I am so sorry."

"Never mind, I can mend it," she returned; then, very persuasively, "You are going to dance with me on my birthday, are you not, Norman?"

"I never dance," he answered coldly. "Lady Hunsden, shall I take you back to your seat?"

Barbara drew aside with flaming cheeks. Nigel had overheard her. She felt hurt, humiliated; he did not seem to notice it, however.

"We shall have a storm presently," he observed carelessly. "Do you see those lurid clouds, Barbara, they are too red for sunset, and the air is hot to suffocation?"

"That is why I am going to dance," she answered wilfully. "You never dance I know, St. Ronans, so I shall not ask you. Harry Rupert will, though. Come!" she said impatiently to her partner, "don't you hear, they are already through the first figure," and she dragged him off.

She tired one luckless youth after another, but she would not stop; she made the consumptive teacher waltz with her till his mother came and took him forcibly away. She danced till, metaphorically, she had not a foot to stand upon, but all the time she had never felt so dismal in her life; the music jarred

on her, the brooding storm fevered her ; she laughed her loudest, but her heart was as sore as it could be.

"Ah, why is he so cruel to me, and on my birthday?" she was saying, and then she grew angry and rebellious. There was an ominous muttering over their heads, the band was playing "God Save the Queen;" men and boys stood with uncovered heads, a few old men from the almshouses joined in with quavering voices "Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks," and so on ; the women tied on the limp hoods over reluctant faces, or darted into the crowd after a missing little one.

"I think, my good friends, you had better go home," called out Dr. Strath's clear voice ; "Lady Hunsden has desired me to say that she will be glad if her own personal friends will adjourn to the house with her immediately."

"We must have three times three, doctor," called out one sturdy fellow.

"All right, my lad, only be quick about it then ; do you see what a storm is coming on? let the women and children get under cover, that's all ; now for it—hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" cried the crowd excitedly, and then the band filed off, and the old men followed them, and then groups of scurrying women.

"Go up to the house, ladies," continued Dr. Strath, authoritatively, "you will have the storm on you in a minute. Mrs. Rupert, let me help you."

Barbara was standing near him, but he did not see her ; she thought he did, poor child, and raged terribly.

"He does not care what becomes of me ; there, I thought so, he has got hold of Katie Rupert ; where's St. Ronans, I wonder ? but it does not matter, I'm not going up to the house," and she hurried after the lessening crowd that were pressing out of the Park gates. Some one touched her ; it was Ruth.

"Miss Heathcote, what are you doing here ? I can't find Naomi and Paul anywhere ; they have the children with them too. Dear, dear, what a terrible storm is coming up," and she looked at the sky and shuddered.

"Are you going on to the mill, Ruth?"

"Yes, I must, or they will be wondering what has become of me. I shall never get there in time," she continued, in a frightened tone ; "I am a sad coward in a storm too."

"I like it of all things," returned Barbara cheerfully ; "don't be afraid, Ruth, I will go with you."

She was quite reckless—a little adventurous ; it rather

pleased her to think that while they had forgotten her in their snug comfort inside, she would be battling with the storm ; how sorry, how frightened they would be when they heard of it afterwards. She never thought about her new dress, or the danger to which she was so madly exposing herself ; it did not matter what would become of her, she thought, since Norman had forgotten his little friend.

They plodded on wearily with all the haste they could possibly make (but both were tired, both jaded) ; they had hardly accomplished half the distance before the storm was upon them in its fury.

That storm was long remembered in Sunningford. The great oak in Hunsden Park, under which the children had feasted a few hours ago, was scathed and riven in two, and one of the villagers' hayricks was fired. In a minute the sky was lurid and illuminated with electric light, the forked lightning darted among the ragged clouds with fearful velocity, while peal after peal of thunder seemed to surcharge the ear, the whole artillery of heaven seemed marching up in one mighty phalanx of sound. Awful beyond all storms was this one, to which Barbara had so thoughtlessly exposed herself. If it alarmed her, it deprived Ruth almost of reason ; she seemed beside herself with terror, her face grew ghastly pale, and at every fresh peal she put her hands to her head with a startled scream.

"Oh, Barbara ! oh, Miss Heathcote ! what shall we do ?" she sobbed ; "I shall die out here. There, it has struck that tree just by—did you see it ? O God, have mercy upon us ! I dare not die just yet."

"Who says we shall die ?" cried Barbara ; "we shall if you stand there just under that hedge. Oh, but it is truly awful !" she continued, with a little tremor of fear on her own account ; "do come on, Ruth, do try and be brave, or you will be the death of us both."

There had been no rain as yet ; now there was a hissing drop or two, and then a great splutter ; presently there was a sweeping deluge on them, a dark curtain of blackness seemed to draw over the whole sky, and its flood-gates opened upon them. There was a little woodcutter's hut at the bend of the road that Barbara remembered to have passed yesterday ; in a quick breathless whisper she bade Ruth follow her, and in a few moments they were standing in the crazy doorway, which just afforded them sufficient refuge from the downpour, the door itself was locked.

"We shall be quite dry here," said Barbara, with a miserable attempt at cheerfulness, but Ruth only crouched down in her corner, and covered her face with her hands.

"Why, Ruth, this is past all reason," she remonstrated. She was trembling all over with fear and excitement herself, but it struck her that such excessive terror was childish.

"Oh, there it is again!" cried Ruth, with a great scream, and both were half blinded by the sudden flash. "Oh, Miss Heathcote, is this to be my punishment? I have done no such great wrong, have I? God knows how I was tempted. I cannot die, I am not fit to die just yet."

She seemed quite delirious; poor Barbara shook in every limb.

"Oh, do be quiet, Ruth; if we have got to die we must, I suppose, but I don't mean to die if I can help it. There's some one coming along the road," she added a minute later, "a man—I can see him all this distance off; he seems hardly able to make way against the storm; is it Norman?" in a tone of intense joy, "it is—why I do believe it is Leigh."

Ruth murmured something inaudible, she seemed hardly able to keep herself upright. Leigh, for it was he, strove manfully against the wind and rain, but the lightning blinded him, so that he could not see them.

"Where are you, girls?" he shouted.

"Here, here," cried Ruth, darting out of the doorway. "Oh, Leigh, my darling Leigh! you will be killed!" and she clung to him, sobbing hysterically.

"Killed, nonsense!" he said impatiently, and trying to free himself; but Ruth was past listening to reason, she had thrown her arms round him, and buried her face on his shoulder like a child; there was nothing for it but to hold her up and speak gently to her; it must all come out now. He tried hard to see Barbara's face, but he could not.

"There, you foolish child, are you better? What makes you such a coward, Ruth, I thought better things of you. The storm is nearly over now, let me wrap you in this cloak I have brought; there," and he folded it round her, and looked tenderly in her tearful face. "Now, Barbara;" but Barbara took it from him without a word; it was too long for her, and she had to hold it up like a train; that was funny; she was counting the big rain-drops, too—one—two—three—how they splashed.

"That's the fortieth," said Bab; she wasn't thinking about anything, she was really quite stunned—at least wet, and cold,

and shivering, what an awful shiver: that was the forty-fifth drop; let her only get out of that doorway, she was choking.

"The rain is not over quite," said Leigh, turning his flushed face—oh, so flushed—to Barbara.

Barbara gave a queer laugh.

"It is a storm," she said, "a cruel storm too; but I mustn't stand here counting the rain-drops any longer, it is harassing, let us go on to the mill."

She was not quite sure whether she was awake or dreaming, or what that sick frightened pain meant at the bottom of her heart.

"Oh, do come, Leigh," she cried. She had not once looked at him, or at Ruth either; she went splashing on through the puddles, trailing cloak and all; her eyes met the still flickering lightning fearlessly, the thunder might have been rapt music for her. "There's another shiver," she said, "two more puddles; I think my feet are rather wet; what an odd night—wonderful; 'Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks;' never mind, I daresay I shall wake up presently and find it all a dream."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"UNTO SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN."

"Think gently of the erring;
Ye know not of the power
With which the dark temptation came,
In some unguarded hour.
Ye may not know how earnestly
They struggled, or how well,
Until the hour of weakness came,
And sadly thus they fell.

"Think gently of the erring,
Oh! do not thou forget,
However darkly stain'd by sin,
He is thy brother yet;
Heir of the self-same heritage,
Child of the self-same God,
He has but stumbled in the path.
Thou hast in weakness trod."

CHRISTIAN LYRICS.

BARBARA was not to be envied as she splashed through the great puddles in her long cloak, and even less so as she stood

in the cheerful mill kitchen before a blazing wood fire, pushing her hair off her face with restless fingers—always a habit of Barbara's when she was perplexed or in trouble, and which gave her the appearance of being all forehead and truly forlorn: she might be monarch of all she surveyed, but a more desolate bedraggled little monarch could not be imagined. An old deaf woman came from somewhere in the back premises, very soapy as to arms, and with an immovable eye, who dried the backs of her hands on her apron and volunteered help. Naomi and Paul had not returned. Barbara thanked her and took off one boot, and remained vaguely contemplating the other. On being reminded of her oversight in a cracked treble, she thanked her again. She drew off from one side of the fire as the others came in. She seemed only intent on warming her feet; but in reality she saw everything that went on. She saw Leigh had regained his usual colour, but not his usual manner; that there was something defiant in the way he waited upon Ruth, and ministered to her special comfort. It was as though he were determined to assert a conscious claim on her. Ruth accepted his attentions reluctantly: his peremptory fondness seemed to terrify her. Every now and then she cast frightened glances at Barbara to see how she was taking it; but Barbara only went on warming her feet. By and by Leigh left them to fetch them some warm tea, as he said, to prevent them taking cold; in reality, because the silence alarmed him. He wanted Barbara to speak first; but Barbara had got a lump in her throat like a sudden quinsy, and could not. She was full of sick pain too, and the thunder seemed to have got into her head.

As soon as Leigh disappeared, Ruth came up to her and timidly put her hand on her wet dress. Barbara shook it out of her hold in a moment and drew steadily away. The movement seemed to startle Ruth, she turned paler than ever.

“Why do you look at me like that, Miss Heathcote?”

“What was that you called him?” panted Bab. “What is he to you, you whom I have called my friend?” She looked like a lioness that had lost its young and is ready for the spring. Her eyes were quite fierce and sparkling; but by a strong effort at will she controlled herself. “What is he to you, Ruth Canham?”

A light tread came behind Ruth as she was about to answer, and a strong arm was thrown round her as Leigh drew her proudly to him. “Be silent, love; you have me to defend you. Barbara, my dear sister, that is not her name.”

Barbara was standing. She sat down now with a little shiver ; but she kept herself quiet.

"This is Ruth Heathcote, Babchen darling ; Ruth Heathcote, my wife."

The thunder must be in her head, Bab thought, or the dull surging of the sea. She was so stunned and cold, and yet her face was flaming scarlet. Her scared look terrified Leigh, for he put Ruth quietly aside and came towards her.

"Oh, Bab ! do speak to us—only one word, Barbara."

"I am listening to you, Gyp." She was ; only all her hearing seemed to be concentrated in her strained brilliant eyes. She verily believed there was real tangible pain at her heart. By and by she got used to it. He knelt down beside her and brought his face on a level with hers. The bold daredevil expression that it had taken at the first moment of discovery gave place to his old look—a little subdued, a little troubled, that was all. "I am listening to you, Gyp," she repeated in a dreary tone ; but even at that moment, when her whole upright nature quailed under the shock, her fingers touched his bright hair lovingly—handsome, wild Gypsy Leigh !

"I want you to hear me," he replied, in his old winning way. "I want you not to be angry with me, you of all people, Dame Muffet !"

The hand closed on his curls almost convulsively.

"Oh, Leigh ! my own brother !—my own only brother !"

It was the first cry of her pent-up, loving, and deceived heart. It awed him into penitence in a moment.

"Don't take on in that way, Barbara. I am always Gyp, you know. You don't think I shall change to you now I am married ?"

She gave a great start. "Married, Leigh ! married, and not to tell me—not to tell Barbara. Cruel ! cruel !" Oh, the passionate pain in her voice ; but she kept it under somehow, though some spring of Bab's heart was broken then and for ever. He moved restlessly to his feet and paced up and down. How was he to answer her ?

"You would not have helped me, Barbara," he said deprecatingly. "It was the only thing I could not have told you."

"No, I would not have helped you," she replied ; "you are right there ; but I would rather you had died than you had done this thing, Leigh." That made him angry. Weak impulsive natures like his are always soon prone to wrath.

"It is no unpardonable sin. How you talk, Barbara. I

have acted foolishly, perhaps ; nay, madly ; but when a man is in love, how can he answer for himself ? ”

“ How old are you, Leigh ? ”

“ One-and-twenty,” he returned, with an abrupt laugh. “ Have you forgotten my age, Barbara ? ”

“ I forget everything, I believe,” she answered in the same dreary voice, as though she were repeating a monotonous lesson. Her fire had died out, the sense of his deceit seemed to crush her. “ Dishonourable, unfair, untrue,” she murmured—“ untrue to us all, Leigh ; but there, you are only a boy—only a mad unhappy boy.” That nettled him again.

“ I suppose I must bear what you have to say, since I have placed myself in this position. Don’t try me too far, though. Come here, Ruth.” And as she advanced obediently towards him he drew her to him with an exulting fondness. “ Look at this face, Barbara, and if you have any honesty you would confess that it ought to win me forgiveness.” Poor woe-begone face that it was, it looked fairer than ever.

“ Oh, Leigh ! if you would let me speak,” she whispered.

“ No, it is my turn now. Wait patiently, love. You are my wife, that is enough for you. Never fear, we shall win them over yet. Barbara, if you would only speak, do you think my father will forgive us ? ”

“ I think you will break his heart, Leigh ; as God knows, you have mine ! ” she muttered to herself. He resumed his restless stridings to and fro.

“ We knew there was no hope, she and I,” he continued. “ It was all my fault. You must not blame her ; none of you, Barbara. I told her that our Heathcote pride would never allow me to marry a yeoman’s daughter, though she might be as beautiful as a princess ; and I never left her, I never gave her any peace till she promised to marry me.” Barbara leant forward to catch his words, but she did not answer.

“ I knew it was wrong, of course ; but I was sorely tempted. I suppose I was mad for the time being, I don’t know. I said to her, ‘ Marry me now, and my father will be sure to forgive me—his only son. I have no fear of him, none ; when you are once my wife, and the thing done and past praying for, everything will come right. There’ll be a row of course ; but that I’m prepared for, and you must take your chance.’ I only bargained for a few weeks’ concealment. My plans were not quite ripe ; but Ruth’s foolish terror has precipitated everything.”

"I could not help it," she pleaded. "Oh, Leigh! I thought God's judgment had overtaken me for my sin, my deceit."

"Tut—nonsense!" he returned hurriedly; and then he went very close to Barbara, leaning over her as she sat with averted eyes.

"Barbara."

"I have heard it all, Leigh."

"Yes, I know; but I want you to stand my friend. You are not going to forsake me in my trouble." He had been bold enough hitherto; but now the real cowardice and weakness of the man showed itself.

"I will never forsake you," she answered calmly.

"Thank you, Barbara; but——"

"Hear me out," she continued. "I want you to understand me for once. You have hurt me terribly, Leigh. You have shocked me somehow; but you are Gyp for all that—my dear old playfellow Gyp. No, Bab will never forsake her brother." And she stretched out her two hands and brought his face down to hers. He kissed her with moistened eyes.

"God bless you, Barbara! but you must forgive Ruth too."

Then Barbara got up. "It is all right between you and me," she answered hurriedly. "I have nothing to say to your wife—nothing."

"Oh, Barbara!"

"I can't help it, Leigh. She was my friend, and she deceived me. Ah! but I forgot"—very piteously—"you deceived me too."

"Yes, it was all my fault. Don't blame her, Babchen."

"Oh, but I must!" she answered, and she confronted her rival again. "She is older than you; she knew better, Leigh. It is not reasonable, perhaps—it is not right; but I cannot tell a lie. I do not forgive her."

"My trouble is greater than I can bear," cried Ruth, turning her white face to her husband; but her sad appealing looks did not help her.

"Why are you so hard on her?" remonstrated Leigh. "It is always so with women—always. I tell you I am to blame, not she."

"No—no; she is right," murmured Ruth brokenly. "I knew better; I was not blinded. All the world will judge me harshly; but I could not give you up, I could not," and she broke into bitter weeping.

Barbara looked at her in stony silence. Her whole soul

yearned over the brother who had deceived her and broken her heart ; but for the woman, the partner of his deceit, she had no pity. So does the devil take part in our sorrows and turn them to his own account. This spice of gall checked the flow of Barbara's generosity ; it had brimmed over, now it stopped. But constant to the integrity of her nature, the nature that loathed all deceit, she had spoken the truth. She was near giving way though when she looked at Leigh. He was half beside himself at the sight of Ruth's grief.

"How can you be so hard on her?" he repeated fiercely.

"Hush! Leigh, come here. I am not speaking against her, am I? Only I cannot forgive her all at once."

"But will you? Will you, presently?"

"I don't know. How can I? I must think it over a little. Don't be angry with me, Leigh, I am so miserable. Only tell me, dear, what I am to do for you ; for it is growing late—so late—and we must go home."

"You must, you mean."

"What!" she exclaimed, in alarm. "You are not going to let me return alone?"

"I must. Don't think me a coward, Barbara ; but I can't face it to-night, that's the truth. Hillyard will be home presently. I shall take him into confidence. I daresay he will find me a sacking and some chaff at the mill. I don't mind what her folk think of it," he continued, with a little disdain ; "but I can't go in and tell my father and Hester, not to-night, Barbara."

"When will you?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, I'll write to-morrow ; no, that will not do, don't you think—can't you help me, Barbara?" He hesitated and looked at her meaningly.

"Help you? Oh, I understand now what you mean by being your friend. I had rather you had asked me anything but that—but I will not go back from my word."

"There's a darling Babchen."

"You want me to go home and tell Daddy. I think I would rather lie down and die on the road, but I'll do it, Leigh."

"My dear brave little sister."

"No, I am not that ; I am nothing but a miserable Barbara—am I to do anything else, Leigh?"

"No, only come and tell me to-morrow how he takes it. I shall be here waiting, you know ; if he be not very angry,

and I may go and plead my own cause, or he will come and see Ruth—all will be well. I am afraid I am acting like a coward, Barbara, but it has all come upon me so suddenly to-night, that I am not prepared for it; if I had only had time given me I should have been stronger."

"Should you, Gyp? well, good-night." She kissed him and clung to him for a moment, and then went out into the wet cold starlight; she never looked at Ruth; presently she was splashing through the great puddles again.

Was it all a dream, a black ugly dream? no, Bab knew it was a reality; the chill night wind blew round her, there was only a faint uncertain light by which to pick her way, but she stepped on resolutely; she was girding up herself to do this thing that he had bidden her: though she would rather lie down on the wet miry road and die, as she told him. What a task was committed to her, the task of all others from which her whole nature shrank. From childhood Barbara had adored her father, she had ever turned to him the sunniest side of her character—not but what the sunshine showed prickles enough sometimes. Still she had ever borne herself towards him with a wholesome sweetness, tempering her rugged moods out of reverence to him, and comporting herself at all times with a filial tenderness that had a strange mingling of the child and the woman in it. And now she was to go home and tell him this thing: that the son and brother of the house, his idolised boy, had deceived them all; that he had gone out of his father's house almost penniless, to entangle himself by marrying a yet more penniless girl; one whom the world, whom they themselves, must regard as beneath them, a village schoolmistress—but that was not all; how would the knowledge of this long deceit, this clandestine marriage, wound his father's heart. "I am his only son, he is sure to forgive me," Leigh had said. He might forgive him; such a nature as the doctor's could not long retain even a just anger, but how would it sap at the foundations of that loving trust in his boy; would it not, might it not, in that saddest of all Scriptural expressions, "bring down his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave"? For to some natures, natures of spotless integrity, there is no sorrow like that of being deceived by one we love—to love, and yet to be ashamed of the object of our love, ah! that is terrible; to go on trusting and happy, and suddenly to be made astonished by some display of guilty weakness, to find out that our idol is not quite what we thought it—not quite so true or so honest, or so

strong, morally strong, as we imagine, ah ! that is saddest of all ; if they had done anything but deceived us, we could have borne it better. Yet one who knew human nature taught us to pray that as we forgive others we might be forgiven. Barbara knew her father well, and therefore she trembled ; but not the less did she gird herself up for the thing she had to do.

She had gone with the way of the world, and condemned the woman ; that was one flaw in her greatness, but still with what sweetness she had answered him, how the strength and faithfulness of her nature had developed under the shock of her great sorrow ; he had done wrong, but she would never forsake him, she would be his true, his truest friend.

They were all in the supper-room when she entered—all but one, him she had left behind her ; of course she got a chiding for her tardiness, she expected that.

"You are very late, Barbara," said Hester, in some displeasure ; "where have you been ?"

Connie whispered as she passed her, "Sydney has been here to supper, and has just gone." Barbara slipped into a chair by her father.

"Why were you not with the rest?" continued Connie ; "no one knew anything about you ; where did you take refuge in the storm, Bab ? Nigel Strath and Norman were in a fine way, I can tell you."

Barbara tried to smile, but she could not. "I was in the woodcutter's hut first, and afterwards at Dort's Mill."

"At Dort's Mill, were you ?" said her father, in some surprise ; "no wonder we could not find you. What makes you so pale, my little Barbara ? There, take your supper, and we will hear about everything afterwards." But Barbara could not eat, the slight morsel she took seemed to choke her, she drank some water feverishly and pushed her plate away. Dr. Heathcote looked at her rather uneasily. "Are you ill that you cannot eat, Barbara ?"

"Yes—no ; there is nothing the matter with me, Dad."

"Where is Leigh ?" asked Hester abruptly. Her quick observation told her something was the matter ; the hot colour rushed over Barbara's face in a moment.

"I left him at Dort's Mill, he came after me there," she stammered ; "don't look at me so, Hester, I am doing the best I can ; why are you all looking at me ?"

"You have something to tell us, Barbara," said her father, struck by the pain in the girl's face.

"Yes ; I have something to say," she repeated, "something that Leigh has bade me tell you." She stopped again—how was she to do it without being too sudden ? she had rehearsed it all coming, but now she was failing miserably—"oh, how am I to tell you ?" she cried, and then she broke down, and put her arms round her father's neck and burst into a flood of tears.

"What does she mean ?" asked the doctor, turning very pale, but he tried to soothe her notwithstanding.

"Barbara, my dear child, if you have any bad news for us, do not keep us in suspense,"—his voice shook terribly,— "what have you to tell me about Leigh ?"

"He is not hurt or killed," replied Barbara, speaking as well as she could for her sobs, "don't think it, father. He is well, quite well—only he is married." That was how she blurted it out. The doctor started as though he had been shot.

"What !" he shouted.

"Oh, Daddy, it is true ; quite—quite true ; but think what a boy he is, so mad, so impulsive, you must forgive him."

"Barbara, will you tell me what you mean ?"

"It is as I have said ; he is married, Daddy, has been married a whole month, to Ruth Canham, our village school-mistress, the sister of Paul Hillyard, the miller." She had not done it well, but she had got it all out now. She drew a great sobbing breath of relief.

"Impossible !" groaned the doctor. Hester's face grew dark. Connie began to cry.

But the unhappy father would not believe it. Barbara had to go all over it again. "My son has acted clandestinely, my boy has deceived his father !" he said at last, when everything was made plain to his understanding.

His daughters hid their faces from the sight of that reverent grief, that pious anger ; once before it had fallen on their devoted heads when he thought his son was disgraced ; now he had not a word against them, but his sorrow was cruel. "I am deceived," he said once and again ; "my only boy has deceived me. I have been a hard father to you all, then. I hope God will forgive the old man." And then when Barbara pleaded the goodness and beauty of Ruth—"Why could he not have come to me and told me this thing ? Am I a tyrant that I should forbid him the girl—what does he mean to do now ? must he and his wife live on me—am I to keep them in their poverty ?"

"They deserve to starve," said Hester harshly; "that woman, too, I've no patience with her, she has disgraced our family."

"Hush, Essie," returned Barbara softly; and then they all sat round him in stricken silence—if only he had stormed—but the sight of all this sorrow was intolerable to them.

The servants came in for prayers, Hester motioned them away. Dr. Heathcote rebuked her; "Have we no need to pray to-night?" he said, and he made them range themselves in their usual order. They placed the big Bible before him, and he began to read to them, but his voice was a little broken; he selected the chapter of the prodigal son, or rather it seemed to open there of its own accord. Tears fell from Barbara's eyes. "I will arise and go to my father;" oh! most touching, most pathetic of all stories. But it was too much for his strength, Hester had to finish it! he sat back in his chair through that and the closing prayer. "Unhappy boy," Barbara could hear him say, and then came the Amen, and they all rose; but he still sat back, shading his face from the light, and very quiet. They waited a little while, and then he said good-night to them all three, very gently. Barbara was last, and he gave her a blessing. "My good true little daughter," he said. Bab thought she saw him totter as he got near the door, and ran towards him, but he put her back kindly, and went out. Hester followed him after a minute, and the others were left alone.

"Sydney will never believe it," said Connie indignantly, "why, he has only seventy pounds a-year, has he, Barbara?"

"Oh, do be quiet, Con," returned Barbara; she wanted Hester to come back that she might speak to her; she sat listening with irritable nerves to every jarring door or creak on the stairs.

Hester came back after a time, but looking pale and frightened. "I have sent off for Norman, Barbara; father is ill." Bab darted out of the room without a word.

Norman came presently, and relieved much of their anxiety. Afterwards, when he spoke to them alone, he said that he had noticed for some days that Dr. Heathcote had been ailing; there had been something on his mind; he thought pecuniary matters. He was positive something more than ordinary was amiss; he must have perfect rest and quiet, and he might yet do well; it was a slight stroke of paralysis, a mere touch, and so on.

They had to tell him all. He was greatly shocked, of course, but very temperate in his expressions about Leigh. Unlike most men of a high moral tone, he was very lenient to the failings of other and weaker mortals; perhaps he refrained from saying all he thought out of pity for Barbara; his eyes rested upon her so softly as he spoke. Barbara kept out of the conversation as much as she could. She could hardly breathe, lest she should be forbidden access to her father's room, but she had no cause for fear. Hester said something about going back to the invalid. “Do so by all means,” he returned, “and you must try and have a good night, Barbara, that you may relieve your sister to-morrow.” Oh, the grateful look Bab gave him.

She had a very restless day of it; she kept in the sick-room most of the time, trying hard to be useful, but provoking Hester sadly by her left-handed ways; she had rather a habit of putting things down in the wrong places and spiriting them away when they were most wanted; but she did her poor little best, however. Towards evening she was relieved from her post, and started off to Leigh immediately; her errand was even a sadder one than yesterday, but she was getting used to trouble already.

He was sitting on the low wall of the mill-garden, waiting for her. He came up, his felt hat rather on one side, and trying to look as usual. Bab put up her face to be kissed, very quietly; his first speech was rather reproachful.

“I have been waiting for you all day, Barbara.”

“I know you have. I could not help it, Leigh—indeed I could not. Can we sit down somewhere?” she looked tired and jaded enough, poor little soul; one day in the sick-room had tired her more than a month would tire some people; that and the trouble and perplexity, too. Leigh pointed to the arbour in the mill-garden. “No, not there,” Bab answered hurriedly. “Why should we not sit under that haystack, yonder?” He complied rather sulkily.

“I hope you are not going to keep up your bad feelings against Ruth,” he said, in rather an injured tone. She let that pass.

“I couldn't come before, Leigh,” she began quickly. “I was sorry enough for your suspense, but far more sorry for the cause. Gyp, dear, Daddy is ill.”

“No!” he cried, starting to his feet. “Don't tell me that I have done it. Don't tell me that, Barbara.”

She put up her hand to her head, wearily. “If you will

only sit down and listen to me ; try to hear it quietly ; he's better now."

She had much ado to tell him all, but she got through it at last, and then she found he was not to be comforted. He sat with his face hidden in his hands, so overwhelmed with self-reproach, so heart-stricken and remorseful, that he made her truly wretched.

"If he die without forgiving me," cried the poor boy—he was little more than a boy—"I shall be miserable all my life long. Why do you keep me from him ? I will see him ; I tell you I will see him, Barbara."

"Do you want to kill him ?" she replied earnestly. "Dear Leigh, has there not been enough wrong-doing without this ?" She drew down his hot hand and stroked it softly : as she looked at him sitting there on the heap of straw, with the setting sun streaming redly on his dark beautiful face, she was reminded of a picture she had seen of the Prodigal Son, and so recalled the reading of last night, that she could hardly restrain her tears.

"If you will only be patient," she pleaded. "Think how hard it is for us, for all of us, and we have done nothing to deserve it." She did not mean to say that ; but such truths would make themselves felt. She went on stroking his hand. "All excitement is forbidden ; it would be mad—fatal, for you to see him now ; in a few days, perhaps—and then only if he asks for you, Norman says."

"He is not likely to do that," returned Leigh bitterly. "Why do you touch me—why do you speak to me, Barbara. I am my father's murderer—am I not ?" and then he turned over on his face on the straw, and would hear nothing that she had to say ; this illness of his father, the father who had doted on him, and indulged him from childhood, did more to bring the full consciousness of his unmanly deceit home to him, than any word could have done. Now, indeed, he saw it in its true light ; the madness, the foolishness, the utter misery of it all. He could not comfort himself and say now as he had said to Barbara, it was no unpardonable sin, only the light folly of youth, and so on ; he could not gloss it over now ; had he not stabbed the tenderest trusting heart that he could ever know ; the faith-fullest, the dearest ? He had now but one wish, the wish of all true penitents, the yearning for a father's forgiveness. He had sinned in the fiery passion of youth, and now he was full of the sickness of desolation ; the wild young heart was a very loving

one, and well for his future that it was so. If repentance could ever be commensurate with sin, he was paying its full penalty in those bitter moments during which he lay with his face downwards on the straw, deaf to everything but his remorse.

Barbara ceased talking to him, and sat wearily looking on the sunset sky. How happy she had been yesterday, and then came the storm, and that terrible hour in the mill-kitchen. Barbara wondered what Naomi and Paul thought about it all; but she was too tired even to follow out this conjecture; her heart bled for Leigh, but yet she was glad that it was so; it took all her hard feelings away somehow, and made her even think tenderly of Ruth. She gathered a few straws idly, and played with them; by and by she said quietly: "It is getting late, and I must go back." He sat up at that.

"Dear Leigh, I wish I could leave you more happily, but I cannot. Try and be brave till I come again to-morrow. Your wife should make you brave, dear."

His face took a less sad expression, and then it brightened all over; there was a click of the mill-gate hard by, and Ruth came out into the lane. They saw she was looking for him. She wore a print hood, such as the women wore about there, and there was a little flush on her face; it looked eager, a little impatient; the hand moved restlessly with the gold guard on it; so had she waited for him evening after evening, in her quiet beauty; was it any wonder that the poor boy was so infatuated? Barbara's heart grew a little hard again. Leigh seemed as though he wanted to go to her.

"There she is, Barbara; you will speak to her to-night, will you not?"

"No, not to-night. See how late it is, and I must be gone."

"And you will come again to-morrow," he repeated, still watching his wife. She did not see them, she was turning into the mill-gate, evidently disappointed, and all his momentary animation vanished.

"Yes, I will come again. Good-night, Leigh, darling." She thought he was going to leave her, but he walked with her to the end of the lane, and took a moody farewell of her. She was tired enough, poor child, but she crept into the barn as he turned and watched him out of sight. She saw Ruth come out again, and advance joyfully to meet him. She saw them move down the lane slowly, hand in hand, like lovers; and then she drew back still farther into the dark silent barn. If they could

only have seen her stretching out her hands after them, with the great tears rolling down her face ; poor Bab, she sobbed all the way home, and long after she got into her den.

"Gyp has a new partner," she said once with a bitter laugh ; and then, "Oh, Gypsy Leigh, my darling—my darling !" and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PRODIGAL SON.

"Yea, little maid, for am not I forgiven ?"

TENNYSON'S *Guinevere*.

AND so trouble had come to Barbara, as it must come to all of us, at some time in our lives.

Broken idols !

Ah ! when shall we learn our lessons, women especially ? Those arms of clay, flesh and blood sympathies—those poor frail humanities to which we will cling, will trust our all ; those sandy fabrics which we build for ourselves ; and so building, perish heart-crushed among our own ruins—when shall we ever test their real value, or estimate them at their true cost ?

There is none good save One. Why are we then so astonished, so downcast, so confused, when our idol, whom we worshipped with such vain worshippings, such empty oblations, suddenly developed weakness, showed itself human, prone to error, a mere broken reed, shaken by the wind of circumstance ? Oh fools, blind beyond all blindness, there is none good save One.

True, most true ; and yet, perhaps, there is no sorrow like disappointed love : no sorrow like a deceived or broken trust in one in whom we have reposed confidence

So it was with Barbara.

It broke her down entirely.

It was the first time that her undisciplined nature was brought face to face with a real tangible trouble ; but she was not bearing it badly. She had winced a little at its suddenness, but there had been no special outcry or lamentation on her part ; already she was beginning to understand the hard, sad, unpalatable truth, that suffering is our destiny—and she took such

portion as fell to her share with the silence that belonged to graver years.

People did not always understand this phase of Bab's nature ; the underlying current, which was so strong and firm, those who lived with her and knew her best failed to comprehend her ; they could not believe that the childishness that had set such store by trifles, whose humours were as variable as an April day, and changed from grave to gay, and from sunshine to storm in a moment, should bear this trouble which had befallen them with a quietness which belonged more to the stoic—just her old self—a little taciturn, a trifle dull, a little jaded-looking, perhaps, and that was all.

She was so reserved, they said. Yes, Bab was very shy with them all ; she shrank even from her best friend, Norman ; if she could, if she had strength enough, she would hide her pain from every one, even from herself ; she could not bear the gentlest probing of her wound, her heart bled inwardly ; she suffered with a weary conscious suffering which knows its pain is for all time ; ten years hence, twenty years, she would care to face it as little as she did now ; the memory of it all would be just as bitter—that she had been so deceived.

Her idol was of clay, and she knew it. The arm upon which she had leaned all too fondly had given way, had deserted her ; she must write against that dearly-loved name as it was written of Reuben of old—"Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." Alas ! was there no reason for her soreness ? with all his faults, all his shortcomings—and that they were many Barbara knew—she could not have believed him capable of this rash act, this prolonged deceit.

"I would rather you had died than you had done this thing, Leigh," she had said to him, and she had meant it too ; and yet she had forgiven him ; her voice had been full of tenderness when she answered him ; the sweetness of her words still haunted him—"Bab will never forsake her brother."

And, with all the strange contradiction of a woman, her love was even greater for him now that he had so sinned and been so forgiven than it had ever been ; if he had been the desire of her eyes hitherto, he was now the one thought of her heart, save and except that sweet love for her father ; she was growing grave with devising projects for his future life and happiness.

"If I could lay down my life for you, dear, I would," she said to herself over and over again ; "if only the opportunity

would come for showing you what is in my heart ; you should see, then, if any self-denial, any sacrifice of my whole, whole life, even be too great for Bab."

And then as regards that one flaw in her generosity, her persistent avoidance of Ruth. The strongest ingredient in Bab's nature was her jealousy ; it leavened everything with its unlawful leaven. Was it not natural then that she should harden her heart, at least for a little while, against the woman who had robbed her of her brother's heart, who was the cause of his temptation, the partner, the willing partner of his deceit ? Trouble does not change our natures, that is the work of a higher power ; it only develops more strongly the marked features of our inner man, bringing strange things to light it may be, some few under-currents, overlooked as Barbara's were, which in time were to flood all.

She was indefatigable in her attendance on her father. Hester began to respect her persevering efforts, and ceased all satirical comments on Bab's ways ; she was a little quaint in her nursing, perhaps, and rather original in her manner of doing things, but there was something pleasant in her left-handedness too ; it gave you novel surprises, and was in all contradistinction to other and preconceived ideas. If you expected a thing to be done in a certain way, Bab would be sure to convince you before long that you were quite wrong ; she contrived the most singular upsets of Hester's little plans in the happiest way imaginable.

"I have given Dad his arrowroot ; it wasn't the time for it at all, but you see—," and so on, and so on ; but somehow it always came right in the end, only it kept Hester on the *qui vive* to know what Bab's next move would be.

But, however she failed in all rules and traditions of nursing, she suited her father admirably ; whether it was her light decided footsteps, her soft manipulations, or the bright sweetness of her voice, he could not bear her long away from him ; he was always rather more inclined to wander and get restless when she was not beside him ; but she never left him except for her evening visits to Dort's Mill.

Leigh was always watching for her ; sometimes he came half-way to meet her, but oftener she found him sitting on the low wall by the weir, throwing in idle pebbles to beguile his impatience.

Those brief talks, far from being a refreshment to Barbara, were often the saddest part of her day. Leigh bore his trouble

irritably ; he grew fretful and morose. Barbara found her influence waning—nothing she said seemed to comfort him ; perhaps her hard treatment of Ruth had something to do with this ; in his heart Leigh yearned over their perfect reconciliation, for Bab was more to him than she or even he suspected.

Leigh had taken up his quarters at the mill now—it was thought on all sides that it was better so ; but he spent most of his time at Briarsley ; he had made his confession to Sir William Travers, much to that gentleman's embarrassment.

"There must be an end to your tutorship to Rolf, I suppose," he had said to him. "Anyhow, you cannot manage to keep a wife on seventy pounds a year ; it is an act worthy of a madman, Mr. Heathcote ; are you sure you were in your right mind ? But there, we must say nothing more about it till Dr. Heathcote is better ; if this gets about though, it may injure your father's profession ; but I don't know, he could hold his own I should think."

"I shall have to go away, I can see that clearly, Barbara," he said one evening. Poor Leigh, he was beginning to be discontented with his husks already.

"Yes, you will have to go away," sighed Bab.

"I'm beginning to see that too ; it will injure the Pater, I'm afraid, among such people as the Deanes and Ruperts, for example, especially since that horrible new doctor—what's his name ?—has come to Durnford. You see it won't sound well that his son has taken a wife from Dort's Mill, a village school-mistress too ; there is no pride like county pride, I believe. Norman says it might not matter so much in London, but it does here. Norman talks of going away ; do you know that, Barbara ?"

"Oh, Leigh !" How she started.

"I heard that from Sir William ; it all comes from that interloper Murray, I believe ; they've been keeping it quiet, but they say he's got a strong party in his favour already, and that Lady Strath is the head of it ; every one knows she hates Norman like poison."

"But Daddy has been here all his life—no, it is impossible !" burst from Barbara's indignant lips.

"Well, I don't know. They say Murray has all the new-fangled notions, such as Norman is always talking about ; young doctors have such advantage over the old ones now. I have heard the Pater say, more than once, that he ought to go to school again to unlearn some of his notions."

"But Norman—what about Norman?" interrupted Barbara.

"Why, just as I have said. He told Sir William that there was no longer space for two such men as he and my father, and that if father ever got into business again, he should recommend him taking a younger man as assistant, and that he thought he ought to find a fairer field for himself elsewhere, though, of course, such a plan would entail difficulties, and he would have to begin all over again; but still he spoke very cheerfully, Sir William said, and as though he were confident of his own resources. Do you think he has saved money, Barbara?"

"I don't know; there are those shares in the Spanish mine, you know; but Leigh, this is only talk—it may never happen."

"No, it may never happen; never, at least, unless the Pater gets as strong and well as ever."

"No, of course; how you frightened me," and Barbara drew a deep breath of relief.

And then they talked of other matters. Barbara wanted to know how Paul and Naomi had taken the news, but Leigh was reticent; Paul had been very angry, he said, but Naomi had talked him over—she was a good woman was Naomi. But it was evident, from his reluctance to speak, that Leigh was rather shy of his new connections, and held himself somewhat aloof from them, and that his stay at the mill had its drawbacks as well as its charms; seeing which Barbara ceased to press him on the subject, and kept her own counsel, as she was beginning to do in most things. But the conversation left an oppression on her. She was full of trouble already, but could anything so dreadful befall her as that Norman should leave her? here was a fresh complication, an unheard-of sorrow: no, she would not face it, she would banish it resolutely from her mind—her own, her dearest friend, no, it could never happen; one of these days she would be brave, and ask him quietly about it all, and beg him not to leave them—one of these days, oh, Barbara!

She reasoned herself into calmness again. She was always reasoning now, hushing herself to sleep, as it were, like a sick baby, and then she went back into her father's room. He was watching for her as usual, and a little restless; his eyes had a wistful look. Bab had noticed it before; she went up to him at once. There was no one in the room but they two. Bab leaned over him, stroking his cheek in her fond way.

"He is so sorry, Daddy, so very, very sorry ; he will not let me comfort him."

She ought not to have said it, perhaps, but Leigh's down-cast face haunted her. Dr. Heathcote fixed his sad eyes on her, but did not answer ; by and by he turned away a little and lay quiet. But the next night when Barbara came in there was the same look again ; this time, however, she would not take any notice of it, but as soon as Hester had left the room he beckoned to her.

"Well, Barbara ?" The impatient fretful tone was too much for her resolution.

"He sent his dear love to you, Daddy," she whispered, and then Hester came back.

But as he was bidding her good-night, and she was stooping over him to kiss him, he brought his lips close to her ear : "You must bring him to-morrow, Barbara ; mind you bring him to-morrow." And he would not seem satisfied till she had nodded an assent.

That nod scorched her soul as a lie would ; she was getting dreadfully scrupulous on such points now ; she knew it would be a great many to-morrows before she brought him, and so it was.

But the day came at last when Leigh stood beside his father's bedside.

In what lies the pathos of such scenes, the real pathos in life ? are there glowing colours there, or mere flesh tints ? long drawn sentences, or only broken words, sighs, sacred silences more eloquent than speech ? In the multitude of words there is foolishness, and in the story of the Prodigal Son itself, that story which stands out alone in parabolic beauty, conspicuous among the other lessons of the Great Master, even there the prodigal used but few words in his petition ; grief is most eloquent in silence, love reveals itself in looks.

Alas ! here is a scene that is absolutely indescribable ; it is too real ; can we not each supply the missing colouring, can we not fill in what is wanting ? All too sad, too vivid, is this poor prodigal standing by his father's bed, with the blanched terrified look on his young face, holding tightly by the hand that has been stretched out to him, and vainly striving for some word that might help him in his need.

He cannot speak for that odd choke in his voice, neither will his manhood help him ; but Dr. Heathcote does in sweet solemn speech, which scares him ; the mind, a little enfeebled

it may be, yet brightening slowly to its old clearness, clings to that grand old story, and makes use of sacred words to express his feelings, his hand holding his boy's tenderly all the while. "And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."

"Father, I too have sinned!"

"I know it, Leigh, I know it; but be comforted."

"I shall never forgive myself—never, father."

"No; but I have forgiven you, my son."

Poor Leigh! those tender words broke him down utterly. He stretched himself across the bed—as he had done on the straw—and he and his manhood had a hard tussle for it. He was eating bitter herbs of penitence, indeed.

"My boy, my own boy, be comforted."

"I have half killed you, father! I am ruining you! I have undone Ruth and myself! What will become of us!"

"We shall be helped, Leigh. The back is made broad enough for the burden—never fear." He tried to smile, but an anxious, almost a weary look came into his face. "We must take no thought for the morrow; no thought for the morrow. Ah, well! God must help us, my son."

He had talked enough now, but Leigh would not leave him.

"He is our only boy, Hester," said Dr. Heathcote, rather feebly; "we must give him his own way—my only one. The rest are all girls—and more's the pity; but we must never let them know, poor children, how we longed for one boy." And he went on stroking Leigh's hair with trembling fingers. "The boy is so clever; he can do anything—God bless him. He will make a great man."

Barbara rose in a little flurry, and almost pushed Leigh away. "You must not stay, you must not; see how you are exciting him."

"Oh, is that you, Barbara? I thought it was your mother. I was wandering a little, was I not?—There, don't be frightened, Leigh, I shall be strong soon. God bless you, dear boy; you may come again to-morrow, and when I am better I will see your wife." And so he comforted him. In after years Barbara never thought of that scene without tears; and in the page of her old Bible—which always seemed to open so naturally at that sweet old story of the prodigal's return—there always lay a lock of grey hair, taken from that dear head, as it lay in its

coffin ; when kneeling by her dead father she had learned to trust and believe in her Heavenly One, and she was a happier and a wiser Barbara than she had been in the bright promise of her youth. Leigh's visit had exhausted Dr. Heathcote terribly ; still, in the end, it was productive of good. From that day he began steadily to mend. In a little while—much sooner than they had dared to hope—he began to creep about feebly in the sunny garden or lane, with Barbara's arm to support him.

It was always Barbara.

In the days of his health it was Hester on whom he leaned, and with whom he took counsel ; now it was Barbara. Perhaps it was their mutual love for Leigh that had drawn them together, or the quaint brightness which was life and health to the sick man ; but, however it came about, there they were, always together, the doctor and his little daughter, with often Norman Strath to make a third—and, still oftener, Leigh.

Barbara had found her work at last. She used to take her painting out on the lawn, and sit by him for hours, beguiling him with her merry talk. Sometimes she read to him ; she would turn over page after page with untiring patience, while her thoughts travelled off into the dark future—Leigh's future, her own. Dr. Heathcote would doze off presently, and then her head would drop on his knee, and she would have a long sad talk with herself, sitting there in the sunshine. But however weary, however foreboding she might feel, she was always ready to greet her father with a smile when he woke, and she would take up the story at the part where she left off, and read on again in her cheerful voice, until he bade her stop.

Ah ! who would say that there were no undercurrents overlooked in Bab's nature ? Undercurrents of sweetness, and thought, and pure unselfish love. They were sitting together one bright September day in the little arbour under the great elm-tree, when Barbara suddenly put down her book.

"There is Leigh coming, Daddy," she said, trying to speak quietly ; "and he has Ruth with him."

Dr. Heathcote's hands trembled a little as he stooped for his stick—for his weakness was still great.

"Give me your arm, Barbara ; we must go and meet them."

"Why, Daddy ? they see us ; they are coming this way."

"Give me your arm," he repeated, getting on his feet with difficulty ; "we must meet her half-way, for my boy's sake ; I wish every one in this house to remember that she is my son's wife," and then he crept slowly down the lawn, leaning heavily on Bab's shoulder. Surely a more Christian gentleman never lived than Dr. Heathcote.

He had never seen Ruth, except in the distance, in the children's gallery. He had no idea what manner of woman she was ; but Ruth knew him.

"There is your father coming to meet us," she said, pointing with her hand. And Leigh, with an exclamation of wonder, hastened his steps and left her. It was so like Leigh—so like quick, impulsive Leigh.

"Why, father," he cried, offering him his strong young arm ; "you are not coming all this way to meet us !"

"I was trying, Leigh," replied Dr. Heathcote, with a faint smile ; "but where is Ruth—where is your wife, my son ? You should not have left her." Leigh looked a little abashed.

"Never forget the respect you owe her—that you owe any woman." And then Ruth drew near.

"My dear, you are very welcome," said the doctor, holding out his kind hand. "Barbara, this is Leigh's wife, remember."

Such a colour flushed Ruth's pale face ; her eyes filled with tears at that tender greeting ; and, as the doctor's hand still held hers, she stooped for an instant and touched it reverently with her lips. But when she had so done she stood hesitating and pressing it between both her own.

"Oh, Dr. Heathcote !" she said ; "can you ever forgive me this thing that I have done ?" and then she hung her head, and the tears streamed from her eyes.

"My dear, there can be no question of forgiveness between you and me."

"Oh, but there can be," she replied, weeping, as though her heart would break. "I would kneel to you, if by so doing I could humble myself more than I am humbled. I have ruined your son's prospects by marrying him. I have wronged—I have injured you all. You must not forgive me yet, or speak to me as you have done—as you have done just now, Dr. Heathcote."

"My child," he returned, with that sweet dignity which had always belonged to him, "if you desire my forgiveness, who am a stranger to you, and Leigh's father, it is yours,

freely. A man who has lain face to face with death, as I have, cannot feel bitterly to any one. There must be peace amongst us, my children, during the little time I am with you." And as she still wept before him, with averted face, he put his hand on her fair hair, almost as though he were blessing her.

"Ruth," he said, "you must be another daughter to me now;" and then very winningly, "Will Leigh's wife give me her arm?"

Barbara turned away, and was seen no more for a long time, and Dr. Heathcote crept slowly back, leaning on his new daughter-in-law; by and by, when Hester came to see what had become of her father, she saw him sitting between them; Ruth in her white dress, her simple cottage-bonnet on the grass beside her, and the afternoon sun shining down on her bright uncovered hair. She and Leigh had been showing him all their hearts, and as he looked from one to the other, from his boy to Ruth, with her sweet earnest face, he was fain to confess that it had gone hard with Leigh, that his temptation was great, and that had she been of gentle blood, she could not have borne herself with better dignity or with such sober and unconscious grace. "She will do," thought the doctor; "she will be the making of Leigh."

And even Hester, coming up with reluctant haughtiness, was driven to acknowledge that her beauty was wonderful, and her voice softened a little from its harshness as she greeted them.

"You must take Leigh's wife into the house, Hester," said Dr. Heathcote, quite cheerfully—he called her for a long time Leigh's wife—"she will take tea with us. Barbara, where's Barbara?" and he looked round for his little daughter anxiously.

"She is in the house, father. I will send her to you. Mrs. Heathcote, will you come with me?" She spoke coldly and with difficulty. Poor Ruth flushed redly over her new name, as she rose and followed Hester down the lawn. Two grander women could hardly be seen together on a summer's day. Ruth was a little larger, a little fairer; her beauty softer perhaps, but they might have passed as sisters.

Ruth's troubles were not quite over. Hester showed her into the room which Nigel Strath had occupied, and after a meaningless sentence or two, left her. Much courtesy was not due to Leigh's wife.

Ruth was alone, and now she felt a little forlorn. She

stood timidly before the glass, setting her lace ruffles and refastening the simple brooch Leigh had given her—his wedding present—and then arranging the folds of her muslin gown, with a nervous feeling that all must be scrupulously neat; her hair did not please her, she was shaking out the braids more loosely to resemble Miss Heathcote's, and wondering whether she might pick some of that lovely jessamine as a further ornament, when the door opened and Barbara came in.

Poor Barbara, her face was crimson, and her cheeks still wet with recent tears, but she came up steadily.

Ruth recoiled a little; a lock of hair escaped from her hand and strayed down her neck, like a golden brown curl; she looked lovely.

"Miss Heathcote, how you startled me."

"Did I? I did not mean to open the door so softly. Look here, Ruth, I want to speak to you."

"Do you, Miss Heathcote?"

"You must not call me Miss Heathcote. I am Barbara, the world calls us sisters, you know."

"The world does," returned Ruth rather bitterly.

"Yes, and we acknowledge it also; did he not say just now, poor darling, that there must be peace amongst us? Yes, there shall be peace, Ruth."

"Between me and you, do you mean?" asked Ruth, hardly able to believe her ears.

"Yes, between you and me. I will tell you the truth; I have used you hardly, Ruth. I have been cruel and unjust. I forgave Leigh, but I could not forgive you."

"I deserved it," murmured Ruth inaudibly.

"No; not more than he did. I see it now; I said you were the woman, and should know better—so you should; but I never allowed that you were sorely tempted also. I was angry and jealous. I could not bear that any woman should care for Leigh; he was all my own once, you know, till he went away and deceived me."

"He loves you dearly enough now; ay, dearly, dearly."

"I am glad to think it," returned Barbara gravely; but to no one, least of all to his wife, could she speak of her pain. "Well, only make him a good wife, and help him to do right, and I shall be grateful to you." But her look and tone were still a little cold, and the cloud returned to Ruth's face.

"Is this all that is to be between us," she pleaded; "only peace, Barbara?" Barbara hesitated.

"Am I never to be your friend again, because I have once deceived you? Leigh has been forgiven with a full forgiveness; is there none such for me?"

Barbara's face worked; she gave no answer, but her heart was softening perceptibly over all this beauty—this supplication.

"Our Divine friend wipes out *all* our debt, and makes it a blank before us. Why cannot earthly friends forgive like that?"

"I forgive you, Ruth."

"Yes; but can you forgive truly? Will you forget the past, and let it be all like clean paper before us—a white clean surface to write our future on? Can you forgive me like that?"

And Barbara answered humbly: "I will try; for Leigh's sake, and for your own, I will try, Ruth; only let there be peace amongst us." And then she put up her face and kissed her with a grave lingering kiss.

And Barbara kept her word.

CHAPTER XXIX.

NIGEL.

"Enshrined above all precious things
My heart has set thee in its core;
Its richest treasure evermore,
And freest love about thee clings.
In life, in death, whate'er betide,
I could not now that gift recall,
Dear love, for I have given thee all."

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

AFTER a storm comes a calm is an axiom as self-evident in life as it is in natural philosophy—or in the governing principles of the material world.

Yes; but what sort of calm?

The calm of quiescence and rest? or merely the dead calm of a waiting, listening pause—when one ponders and communes with oneself as to what may next happen? or lastly, the blank rest of the worn-out soul, whom nothing can affright more?—oh, saddest of all calms that!

But then as to that pause. How can one describe the

strangeness of that listening feeling ; it is as though in our own inner silence—"that chamber, where we are bidden to commune with ourselves and be still"—in that great solitude we literally hear the slow surging of the next wave which is to break upon us and carry us a little higher, a little lower, it may be, but always nearer to what ? The end.

It comes, but it does not surprise us ; we were waiting for it ; it drowns us in sleep ; its coldness numbs us ; it bruises us a little ; we are stranded high and dry ; "drawn out of many waters ;" ay, truly, bitter waters ; but what recks it, so that our feet are planted on that rock at last ?

These are the secret, and it may be the supernatural, instincts of the soul. Happy those to whom this listening pause does not come, they will not understand ; not all the sons and daughters of our humanity are gifted with this finer sense and attribute of being ; there are many who, merged in business or pleasure, never know what it is to lose themselves in their own solitudes, to stand alone, and face to face with their own identity—it would scare them like a ghost. Who am I ? and what am I, shut up in this corporeal body ? this body which, as a divine has expressed in some such words, has nothing to do with my soul, and yet which is so firmly wedded to it, "that the thought of a divorce from it fills me with terror." "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder ;" a terrible thought that for the suicide ! Such questions as these would never present themselves at all to the material mind—these sacred horrors—these shudderings of a too conscious soul are utterly unknown to them to whom the open vision of life is all-sufficient.

And now just such a pause as this had come to Barbara ; not that she had reasoned it out with herself or knew for one instant that she was on the landing-place, or perhaps, as one might more truly say, in the anteroom of some new misery ; she was quite unconscious of the strange complication of circumstances that awaited her ; still she had a queer habit of saying to herself sometimes : "I wonder what will happen to me to-day ?" and she would go on wondering in a vague expectant way till evening. But it was always for sad things now.

And nothing would have surprised her ! So she said, but all the same she was oddly startled when she received a letter from Nigel one morning, telling her that he had been ill, very ill ; and thereupon followed a list of ailments, which were sufficient to make that poor little hard-worked heart of hers ache dreadfully, so underlined and conspicuously mournful did they appear.

It was so reproachful too; why had she never been near him all this time? her neglect and indifference were too apparent; even Nest noticed it. Why had she avoided him so the last time they had met, and never allowed him to sympathise with her in her trouble? she was treating him as a stranger, and so on. The irritability and peremptoriness of the whole letter made Barbara smile, but she thought it very sad too; "if she had a spark of feeling left for her old master," it went on—master strongly scored under—"would she come and see him this morning? he would be waiting for her in the studio," and he ended by assuring her that in spite of their many misunderstandings, he should always remain her "faithful friend, Nigel."

Barbara flushed a little over that signature; he had always before signed himself St. Ronans, or Bab's master; but Nigel—Barbara put it away hurriedly, and went down to her father.

"Daddy, do you know St. Ronans has been ill?"

"Why, no, Barbara, we have not heard it from Norman, have we?"

"That's just it," returned Barbara, with a puzzled look; "we should have been sure to have heard it from him if it had been anything serious. I can't make that out, Daddy."

"No, no more can I, unless, perhaps, Lady Strath sent for Murray."

"If I thought that!" exclaimed Barbara fiercely; "but no, it is unfair to condemn people on supposition; I will never believe it."

"Come, that's generous," returned her father.

"Well, I don't know, I can't help believing in St. Ronans; with all his faults he is so thoroughly true. I have just had a letter from him, he seems dreadfully down, poor fellow, and more than half inclined to quarrel with me for neglecting him; he says he has been ill, very ill. Do you think you can spare me this afternoon, Daddy?"

The doctor eyed her fondly.

"I don't think I shall ever have the heart to spare you again, my Barbara."

"Very well, then, I won't go. He will be very angry with me, I am afraid, but never mind."

"Never mind what? why, you don't believe I'm serious, Bab? They say sick people are always selfish, but somehow I hope I never shall be that."

"And you can spare me, Daddy?" She had been greatly

disappointed in spite of her brave looks, for her heart was yearning over her friend.

"Of course I can; what a vain little woman it is. There, run away and make yourself as smart as you can, for your old father to admire you."

"Oh, there's no such hurry," said Bab gleefully; "you are not going to miss your morning's reading for all the St. Ronans in the world," and she drew a slip of paper to her, and wrote in her bold decided hand:

"I AM sorry to hear you have been ill. I will come to you this afternoon. BARBARA."

And sent it off in her abrupt way on that instant. But she could not keep her attention on her reading at all, she worked on at it laboriously, but it seemed the longest morning she had ever spent. A queer expectant feeling was on her—a sort of presentiment, but for her life she could not have said what it was she feared; it was quite a relief when she was ready dressed and prepared to start. "I shall hear about everything from Nest," she said to herself, and she went off at a brisk trot, which brought her to the lodge gates of St. Ronans.

She went round the garden and in at one of the glass doors of the studio, in her usual Bohemian fashion. She hoped to find Nest there, but to her disappointment St. Ronans was alone; alone, and doing nothing as far as Barbara could see.

He came forward gravely enough, and even in that first instant she could not fail to be struck painfully with the delicacy, almost the frail look, of the whole man. There were certainly the marks of recent and severe illness about him; his face was thinner and paler, and his eyes large and brilliant—he seemed etherealised almost.

"So you have come at last, Barbara."

"Yes, I have come at last," repeated Barbara, trying to speak cheerfully; "it has seemed a long time; I know it has, but I have been full of trouble." And she hung up her bonnet and cloak in the old place and seated herself near him.

"Does trouble make you forget your friends?" he inquired rather bitterly.

"I have never thought of them so much; don't shake your head, St. Ronans, you are hurt with me I see, but why did you not let me know that you had been ill?"

"What would have been the use?" he returned in a re-

proachful voice ; " would you have left your father to come and see me ? "

" Why, I have come now, " she answered, trying lightly to defend herself.

" Yes, you have come now, after an absence and silence of weeks ; you have not used me well, Barbara, indeed you have not ; as I told you in my letter, you have treated me as a stranger and refused my sympathy, you have shut me out entirely from you and yours, and then you wonder that I never sent for you.—How could I ? " and then he repeated yet more bitterly : " How could I, till I was obliged ? "

" Till you were obliged, St. Ronans ? "

" Yes, till I could bear myself no longer. What I have suffered ! I was sick for the sight of you, Barbara ; I thought at first that I would not add to your trouble. I allowed my mother to send for Murray, for fear Norman should tell you ; what a fool I was for my pains, as though you would have cared "—this in a tone of exceeding pain.

" How can you wrong me so cruelly, St. Ronans ? " and tears started to Barbara's eyes.

" Do I wrong you ? " he said more gently ; " that is the first word of comfort I have had yet. Perhaps I am a little hard upon you after all ; you have been sorely tried, you are altered somehow, Barbara, you do not look well. "

" How can I ? " she returned in a choked voice. She felt she had already as much as she could bear without his reproaches.

" No, you have had a sad time, all of you, but your father is better now ; I have been thinking of you day and night, most tenderly—you must believe it, Barbara. That mad brother of yours——" Bab's eyes looked dangerous, there were no tears in them now.

" We will leave that subject, if you please, St. Ronans. "

" And why ? " he remonstrated ; " did I not say you treated me as a stranger, and so coldly, too ? Why should we not discuss what has already happened ? "

" Because I forbid it, " she returned with unusual haughtiness,—and then she relented at the sight of his pale face. " St. Ronans, you have said well, that I have been sorely tried. Leave these painful things alone ; if Leigh has done wrong, we have all forgiven him, our dear angel has set us that example, " and, with some hesitation, " and we have forgiven Ruth too. "

The Strath lip curled a little proudly at this.

"Few fathers would have pardoned such a *mésalliance*.

"Few, perhaps; but he is one of a thousand, and God bless him!" cried Bab. "There, if you will not change the subject, I must go, for I will not discuss it with you, and I have not seen Nest."

"Nest is in London," returned Nigel sullenly; "she is buying her trousseau; she will not be home till late."

"In London?" said Barbara in a disappointed tone. She felt caught in a trap; she had no intention of an indefinitely prolonged *tête-à-tête* with Nigel; she had grown rather shy of him lately. Nigel caught the tone in a moment.

"You did not mean your visit for me then?" and as she coloured visibly, "Why, Barbara, you are not growing prudish? I wrote that letter because I wanted you all to myself, as I had something particular to say to you, and I knew it was no good my coming over to your house, as I could not get you alone; why are you looking like a caged thing, Barbaretta? this is not the first time we have been shut up together."

"No, but that was because of the painting lesson," returned Barbara. It was rather a lame excuse; but she had but one clear and definite thought, that her old acquaintance St. Ronans was decidedly odd, and that she wanted to escape; her embarrassment seemed to delight Nigel, the cloud passed from his brow, he looked triumphant.

"Well, I am going to give you a lesson now," he replied, with a mischievous glance at her flushed face. "You know that Italian verb you refused to conjugate before." Barbara sprung from her seat.

"Let me go, St. Ronans. I tell you my father wants me, and I cannot stay any longer to-day. I will go—I say——" But Nigel had planted himself resolutely before her, and she was afraid of his detaining hand.

"Sit down, Barbara, I will not have you leave me like this; there, we will not jest any more, but your frightened face tempted me. What I have to say now shall be serious; I promise you that."

"And you will not talk nonsense, St. Ronans?"

"No; I will not talk nonsense, it shall be all sober earnest between you and me: there, Barbara," holding out his hand, and going very near her, "that is the hand of one who loves you, will you be my wife?" She would have sprung from her seat again, but he firmly, very firmly, put her back; he had hold of her hand now, and kept it tightly. Poor Bab! she looked up

at him with great startled eyes, but she could not face his look ; then indeed she turned a little pale.

"I tell you, I love you, Barbara."

"I am sorry for it, St. Ronans."

"You are just the dearest in all the world to me, mine, my own Barbara."

"Not yours, thank God !" but her voice was inaudible ; he stooped down, but he could not catch her words.

"What did you say, dear ? I could not hear it ; try to speak, if it be only one word, Barbara."

"I will not speak, St. Ronans."

"Will not, Barbara ?"

"No ; not while you hold my hand like that—oh, how you are hurting me," and as he reluctantly freed her, she gave him a quick scared glance to see if he were in earnest.

"You will break my heart if you look at me like that," he said, watching her.

"I cannot help it, I am very miserable. We are both miserable, I believe—if you would only say that you did not mean it."

"I cannot say what is not true, Barbara."

"Ah, then indeed we are most miserable ! why could you not have been satisfied with having me for your friend ? Bab was so proud of her master. There cannot be this thing between you and me."

"You cannot be my wife ?"

"No, I cannot," she returned, crimsoning like a rose.

"And why not, my dearest ?"

She started angrily at that.

"You shall not call me that—you shall not. How dare you ?" and she hid her face in her hands, and rocked herself to and fro. How was she ever to escape from him ? He sat down beside her, and was silent for a little while, putting his hand to his heart as though in pain. The unnatural quiet disturbed Barbara ; she looked up, pushing her hair from her face in her restless fashion ; she could not bear the thought that he was watching her.

"Is this your answer, Barbara ?" He spoke calmly, but his lips were blue.

"Yes—no, I have not answered you properly, have I, St. Ronans ? What ought I to say ? I am so stunned."

His face brightened all over.

"Say—I will try to love you, Nigel !"

"No, no—you are St. Ronans ; I will never call you that, and I do love you dearly, only not as you wish me."

"But you would in a little time, Barbara ; think what you are to me, and try."

"It would be no use trying," she answered sadly, "I know my own feelings for you too well. I am very sorry, sorry for myself as well as you ; if I knew how to thank you I would ; but you must let me leave you now." She spoke very gently, but he started up quite fiercely at that ; she had refused him—refused him, Nigel Strath—no, it was impossible.

Any one else would have said it was impossible to thus look at them—the man with his beautiful face carrying himself so proudly and well, speaking like a young prince ; and the doctor's little daughter, with her quaint face and ways, pushing her hair into rough ripples, and answering him in her quick decided voice, sorely troubled indeed, but no longer abashed.

"You shall not go, Barbara ; do you know you are killing me ? Wait a moment ?" and he had to hold himself still in that strange quietness before he could go on.

"Why do you excite yourself like this ?" said Barbara, now really frightened. "I am not killing you, it is cruel to tell me that ; how can I help giving you this pain ?"

He did not answer, and she leant over him and touched him.

"St. Ronans." He turned from her angrily.

"I will not answer to that name. I am Nigel."

"No, no, not to me," she implored, feeling how much it involved ; "let me keep to the old name, it is very dear to me."

"Well, what do you want with me ?" he asked, fixing his brilliant eyes on her ; their despairing look filled Barbara with sick pain, but she answered quietly :

"I want you to forgive me ; it is not my fault that you are so unhappy, is it ?—tell Barbara you are not angry with her, and let her go."

"Yes, you may go," he repeated in a strange tone. "But you will be here again soon, I feel it, I know it ; you are making me suffer tortures, but you will not escape me. I tell you I will move heaven and earth to win you, and I will win you yet, Barbara."

"Good-bye," she answered sadly, and turned away ; and he called out after her in a loud voice, "Good-bye, my Barbara," and then she went.

Poor Barbara ! another rock was shivered before her eyes ; as she walked home through the sweet autumn lanes she hardly

knew where her feet were carrying her, she felt so stunned and dizzy. If this were life, what a terrible thing life was after all, how full of trouble and sadness. Here she had given pain to the man whom she loved as a brother, she had gone near to break his heart—what a cruel alternative had been hers ; and the bitter tears rushed into Barbara's eyes. She could have sobbed aloud, so much did she shrink from the thing that she had done.

It was all over with Bab's master ; as she recalled the softness and tenderness of his speech, the dumb pleading of his eyes, she was almost beside herself with wonder. That he should love her at all was strange, but that he should love her with such passion was a thing incredible. "Why should he ? what am I that he should care for me like this ?" cried the poor child ; and her heart was heavy with reflected sadness.

She was not expected home for hours ; she stole through the shrubberies, and by a back way into the house, and crept silently into her den and hid herself like a wounded thing, but not all for sorrow ; oh no, a wondrous light was breaking over Barbara. She stood startled and awe-struck on the brink of a new revelation. She had been very near it once or twice, but Nigel's words had woke her to full consciousness. Sometimes a touch will kindle a spark into a flame. It may have been long smouldering ; all at once it will ignite ; so it was with Barbara. She had scarcely known at first what this strong repugnance to Nigel's offer had meant, or why she had shrunk so angrily from his tenderness. And then all at once it broke on her, and she had risen up trembling and in haste to be gone—gone with her newly discovered treasure.

Ah ! what if Nigel could see her now, sitting in the twilight, her face crimson, her eyes still wet with the tears she had shed. Already she had forgotten his loving words ; what were their sweetness compared to those she was repeating over and over to herself, saying them softly in the darkness, "Be faithful to me, Barbara—little Barbara, be faithful to me."

Ah ! is it so ? Has the glamour fallen from your eyes ? Do you know it at last, Barbara ?

Yes, she knew it at last ; she recognised who was her lord and master—her dear, her dearest friend, now. She repeated his name softly, and started and blushed over it ; she knew all her sweet wholesome love was his, and his alone. "I am faithful to you, Norman," she whispered, "my poor, poor St. Ronans," and her arms fell to her side as she went into a long dream.

By and by she heard his voice in the hall below, and her heart beat and throbbed to suffocation. A week ago, yesterday even, she would have flown down three steps at a time to meet him ; now she stood rooted to the spot and spellbound. How could she ever go to him, ever speak to him again, she wondered ; why, he would read the secret of her new bashfulness at once, ay, truly he would, with the quick instinct of love, and all that sad future would never have got itself written, Barbara.

Why are there no invisible forces to impel us to our happiest destiny ? Why is it that "it might have been " is written upon so many lives that have just missed their right turning ? Why, indeed ! But the true history of many a lost life will never really be known till the books are opened hereafter ; and then shall we see the clear guidance that led them through such devious wanderings, and how, through all the weariness and blindness of the road, a voice behind them has seemed to say, "this is the way, walk ye in it," and what matter, however toilsome and hard, if it lead them to the "many mansions" at last.

Barbara, shrinking and trembling in the twilight, hears Norman's voice, as he closes the door with a clang, and creeps to the window to look after him.

"What a terrible thing life was after all," she had said a few hours ago, when the remembrance of Nigel's misery was fresh upon her, and she had wept such bitter tears of pity and self-reproach. Would she say that now ? No one could blame Barbara for this sudden revulsion of feeling, for the quick kindling of a light that nearly blinded her, even though it were at the expense of another's happiness. Her heart would be heavy for many a long day, for Nigel's sake ; even now the first bloom and sweetness of her love was gone. But still she would not have been human, not Barbara, if, for the time being, intense feelings of thankfulness, nearly akin to joy, did not predominate when she first woke to the full knowledge that she loved as she would be loved.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WARP AND THE WOOF.

“Weakness to be wroth with weakness ! woman’s pleasure, woman’s pain—

Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain :

Woman is the lesser man, and all thy passions, match’d with mine,
Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine.”

TENNYSON’S *Locksley Hall*.

THERE are pauses in life, why not in fiction ?

It has seemed as though we have loitered, in this narrative, along a sunny highroad, where there are trees and hedgerows, and plenty of pleasant shade ; there is a broad low level everywhere, there are byways, soft glades, trickles of water out of hidden runlets, here and there a grating pebble, a little rough place perhaps, and thorns and flowers everywhere.

We have been gathering flowers—a brier rose or two, honeysuckle, a spray of eglantine, now a tall foxglove or a scarlet poppy, by and by there will be trails of blue convulvi, tied all together with green ears of corn ; the flowers are homely, the colours not well blended, some are already withering ; a poor thing after all, a hedgerow nosegay, a few bright-coloured weeds. The sun has been very bright, there has been a play of shadows, now it is a little overcast, there is a ground mist rising, the road grows rugged, it is broken up, sterile, a little barren ; here is a steep ascent, rough hewn stones, more and more difficulties. The mountain-tops are still gilded with sunshine, we shall have a fine evening ; let us throw away our flowers, they are full of thorns, and now let us pick our way among those granite boulders, and so on to that steep defile which looks so dark and dolorous in the distance ; there are stumbling-blocks, but every step will lead us nearer the end.

Two men have found out the brier rose, and love her, prickles and all : one has stooped to pluck her, and withdrawn his hand sorely wounded, and the other—well, two cannot wear her, and she loves whom she loves, hence the complication.

Two men, both generous, one strong, and Barbara brimming over with truth, and all the dull tide of circumstance setting dead against her, and she as true as the needle to its magnet, and invisible hands parting them.

At odds, ah, miserably at odds.

Poor Nigel!

He was not very strong, neither physically nor morally, but he had all the makings of a good man about him. Life had been rather against him; with a sensitive temperament, almost feminine in its delicate organisation, and keenly alive to all forms of sufferings, he had had to struggle through some of his best years with the burden of a sickly body and irritable nerves, which he had borne with every conceivable impatience, and the rebellion of a haughty spirit.

All his resources were in his art, and in intercourse with kindred minds; he became cynical, fastidious, and sentimental in a breath; he commenced pictures, philosophised, and tried to blend the stoic and epicurean together, and failing that, he indulged himself in the two love dreams of his life, from which he awoke soured in mind and heart, to find that mere beauty could not content him, and with the chivalrous desire strong upon him to wage war with womankind ever after.

This feeling was strong upon him when Barbara met him; he had thought her a child, and treated her brusquely; afterwards he found he could not forget her through the restless night that followed his accident, he could not get her out of his head, she haunted his dreams; by and by he found the little Samaritan was the central figure in his life picture.

He had sketched her over and over again as she had first appeared to him, sketches full of strong nervous power, and had hidden them away in his secret drawers; he would never forget that evening—never!

The setting sun, the dark line of firs, the young bracken, the horrible sick pain, the loneliness, the terror of the starting blood: then the little demure figure in grey, with low ripples of brown hair half hiding her forehead and great startled eyes; the timid womanly advances, the childlike awkwardness, the frightened sweetness of her voice, and the softness of the little hands that guided him: she had made him lean on her shoulder, and he had looked down on her, his small slender prop, and wondered as he did so whether she were some little Sister of the Poor, a stray novice perhaps, new to her duties, so very sober were her garb and look, and when he found out his mistake, the quaintness of her aspect amused him, and after that there was nothing but faintness and pain. But he hankered after her strangely in his illness, though he chose to be a little difficult and remain upstairs long after his due time; he began to listen

for her footsteps, the only loud ones about the house ; he knew the decided little tapping of her heels along the passages, as well as he knew the sweep and "silking" of his mother's dress ; he would brighten up and smile at her clear whistling, or the chirruping voice in which she called "Ben." Often he watched her playing odd pranks with him in the garden, trying to make him perform a *valse à deux temps* with her on his hind legs, much to Ben's disgust ; he would move his legs stiffly round about a few times, nibbling and licking his bushy paws all the time like a bear, and then he would feign a growl and refuse to stir, and Barbara would finish her dance *à la Dervise*, getting faster and faster ; and then there would be hide-and-seek between the trees, and touch last, and all manner of childish games ; and then all at once she would come down the lawn, her quicksilver gone, walking quietly with her hands behind her, and her face as grave as a judge. She did not look pretty then, she had a way of puckering up her forehead, and drawing down the corners of her mouth, and her hair looked too heavy for her head, and was often rough ; then Nigel would note all her defects with his fastidious eye ; "there is no need for Samaritans to be handsome, I suppose," he would say ; "this Samaritan of mine is the greatest oddity I have ever seen !" but he was always disappointed, notwithstanding, when the oddity went in.

And then he came downstairs and saw her in one of her sunny moods, in the midst of flowers and sunshine, making up a very pretty colour picture—when she sat and chirped at him like a little bird, and then he began to take interest in her in earnest, all the more that he found her freshness did not pall upon him, and that her originality was striking. By and by he discovered that Barbara had the happy knack of charming away his fretful humours—that she gave him his way, and had her own at the same time ; if she were cross to others, she was never so to him, and that pleased his masculine vanity ; he was never dull, never *ennuyé* when she was by. Hester's beauty was ponderous, her gentleness inane, after Barbara ; this little fresh piece of life was to him the most charming compound of frankness and innocence, eked out with perfect honesty, that he had ever seen ; presently, because she was the soul of truth and never disappointed him, he grew to love her.

She had been his pupil for some time then, and they had been thrown into daily, hourly intercourse, very dangerous to a man so susceptible as Nigel ; from the couch, where he had

ruled and tyrannised over the women folk of Dr. Heathcote's household, he suddenly held out the sceptre of his power to this small insignificant Barbara—this Barbara so humble in her own estimation that she had prejudged herself that she should find favour in no man's eyes—and lo, this lordly young Ahasuerus, beautiful with a man's beauty, had stooped to her and loved her with his whole heart. "You are just the dearest thing in the world to me," he had said to her in that generous offer of his, and how had the full knowledge of that fact stunned her!

Well it was strange; it was less surprising that Dr. Strath should love her, seeing that he was not given to lay much stress on personal beauty, but that Nigel, with his fastidious tastes, his artist's eye, should fix on this insignificant girl, should pour out upon her all the wealth of his passionate love, only to be repulsed, was a thing indeed to excite wonder. Was his clear sight deceived, were Barbara's faults beauties in his eyes, could he overlook her want of style, her lack of dignity, that he should take her into his heart of hearts, that he should love her as he never loved fair-haired Gretchen, or Maria, as he would never love any other woman till the hour of his death?

This love was driving him wild with the desire of possession, he had never known rest or comfort since he had found out what she was to him—it was wearing him terribly, health and spirits alike; he had wooed her in every way that he could, but she was not to be won; she had laughed away his honest speeches, his open professions of love had fallen meaninglessly on her ear—either she would not, or she could not attach sober truth to them; she had grown into shy startled ways with him—in her trouble she had held herself completely aloof from his sympathy; and now when galled by her seeming indifference, and unable to bear any longer the suspense and misery of his love, he had dared his all on the single throw of the lover, she had shrunk away from him with such undisguised pain and terror, with such honest negatives on her lips, and such sorrowful firmness in every line of her face, as to suggest no hope to him, no single chance of success.

She did not love him, he saw that clearly, but would he give her up for that? Never! As is the case with some impulsive natures, the very resistance to his wish added fuel to his flame, and even while borne down by despair and sharp physical pain he yet registered a sort of vow in his heart that, willingly or unwillingly, she should be his. "I will move heaven and earth to win you," he had said to her, and his

words had filled her with a chill presentiment of some coming trouble. "And one day I will win you, Barbara," and then as she left him he called out after her yet more loudly, "my Barbara."

She had never feared him before as she did then, as she went through the lanes stunned and trembling and almost sobbing with pain; she recalled, with a feeling akin to terror, the sad eyes, the thin face, the lips blue with some internal agony, the sharp passion of his voice as he pleaded with her, the almost unearthly beauty of his whole face, and as she remembered it her trouble was very great—all the more that she had grown to love him with the same tender, gay, and half-protecting love which she felt for Leigh. But Leigh had deceived her fond idolatry—and Nigel become her lover and frightened her—and so there was no rest for Barbara till that sudden light broke upon her and showed her the truth writ up in dazzling letters of gold, and after that she forgot her trouble and was no more afraid, and though she would mourn for her poor St. Ronans with the constancy of a faithful heart, yet for the time being her joy was very great when she first woke to her full life, and basked in the sunshine of her love.

And that night, when Barbara repeated her prayers, she said "Thank God for the truth," and once again, "poor, poor St. Ronans," and then she slept the happy sleep of youth. And so Barbara took her first sip of the chalice of life. By and by she may say the draught is bitter as she drinks deeper, but she will never quite forget the sweetness of that first taste.

But with Dr. Strath things were different. All these years he had been walking, on a steep uphill road of his own devising, and not being gifted with second sight, or able to prognosticate an ominous future, he had tried no short cuts to the goal of his desire—preferring to work on patiently, doing the duty that lay before him, and trusting almost with childlike faith for what the coming time might yield him.

Seldom was such stern integrity and such rigid self-denial to be seen in a man so young as Norman Strath.

Not that his youth was very apparent either to himself and others, and few would have believed that Dr. Strath had in reality only attained his thirtieth year, but hardship and mental labour had told their tale on him, and a toilsome youth had settled down into premature middle age.

How he had struggled and worked no one but himself knew, any more than they did how he had washed his hands in

innocency, and kept the thing that was right from his youth ; few men, if they had had to write out the account of their past life, their young life, would have written out such a pure record as Norman Strath, albeit he was mixed up so early with the world of school and the world of life, cast upon the crowd as it were, as utterly friendless and forlorn as any lad could be who had but one human being belonging to him, and that his mother.

“He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow :” it was verily those words which kept him from straying from that narrow rugged track—the knowledge that he was her all, that she depended upon him, that in her loneliness she was thinking of and praying for him ; and though, from the strange circumstances of his life, those circumstances which Mrs. Strath had so mournfully narrated to Barbara, she was more a stranger to him than most mothers are to their sons—yet he soon began to regard her with that chivalrous devotion with which young manhood must always endow some woman—and when they came together he already found himself disposed to love her with his whole heart.

Not that his love ever became demonstrative. Norman was never demonstrative to any one, he was always a little reserved in his affections—apt to wax curt and hostile in a breath, even to those he liked best. His mother and he lived on the pleasantest and most amicable footing ; he was loath to lose her presence even for a day, and submitted willingly to all her soft tyrannies for his comfort, and yet, though she never confessed it, she was often disappointed and chilled by his persistent reticence, and his want of freedom of speaking on all that concerned himself. It seemed as though, not even to his mother—that tender woman who shared his life—could he break down that barrier which hid his truer self ; and so it had come to pass that, upright and self-denying as he was, he was almost a stranger to the one who knew him best, and dearly as she loved him, this was a great grief to her.

Even concerning that morbid remorse of his about his cousin, she knew little or nothing. If he could ever have put his pain into words, and told her, her shrewd sense would have proved to him his error ; the whole thing was so dim and shadowy that the very bringing it forth into the light of day would have caused it to wither and dwarf to its true dimensions ; he would have absolved himself from his boyish vow, he would have learnt to smile at it long ago, but now the very

mystery and darkness in which he kept it had fostered the evil thing—it was a monster of his own devising—one day it might master him. It was the one plague-spot in his otherwise healthy vitality—his strong rigid nature had conceived the unwholesome idea, and it engendered a form of morbid suffering that was surprising. He was beginning to think his proud denial was mistaken, and that he had wittingly and knowingly given that fatal push. Perhaps this was the truth, that it was the unconscious temptation of a moment, of which he was scarcely sensible himself. But whether or not it were the case, still he stood self-convicted of anger and fierce wrestling, and the tyranny of the strong over the weak, and the author of all the untoward circumstances that led to that unlucky accident, which brought out all the inherent delicacy of Nigel's constitution, and made him the restless discontented being he really was.

Norman's clear sight read all the faults of Nigel's true nature: he owned he was haughty, captious and domineering, prone to much selfishness and exaggeration of feeling, but not the less did he love and yearn over him in his heart, and long to see him beloved and useful in his generation, and employing his great talents and opportunities to the good of his fellow-creatures in a wider and deeper sense. He mourned sincerely over the indolence that was partly constitutional, and partly acquired: it seemed a grievous thing to him, to see a man of Nigel's culture spending the best years of his life in aimless travel, and still more aimless repose, neither working at his art nor ambitious of success, sheltering himself from any labour, however noble, on the plea of the hypochondriac, and only adding to his real disease by the uncurbed violence of his passions, and the diversity of his many fancies. And yet in spite of all, he knew him to be gentle at heart, and honest and generous to a fault; he could be magnanimous and rouse himself on occasions, and over and over again Norman had owned to himself that he had never known a man more truly lovable than Nigel; in other hands, and under other circumstances, if he were compelled to labour for his sustenance, for example, or to take care of one younger and weaker than himself, he could imagine him casting off the shell of old habits, and becoming a nobler and stronger man than he was ever likely now to become.

This restless discontent became a daily and hourly anxiety to Norman; he saw that some hidden trouble was wearing him, and he began to long for his happiness and restoration to health,

and so he set himself seriously to task, to find out and minister to this mental disease, as he called it. For he was as ignorant of the real cause as he could possibly be. And yet he loved Barbara, oh ! how he loved her ! He had had one or two fits of jealousy when Barbara accepted the necklace on her birthday for example, but they were merely temporary feelings of uneasiness, and passed away as soon as he brought them to the test of reason ; naturally unsuspecting, he never really supposed he had any grave cause to fear a rival in Nigel. That he should want his Barbara, his plain homely Barbara, would have seemed a thing incredible to him ; and it was only some sudden presentiment, bred of his great love, perhaps, that drew from him those few words, "Be faithful to me, Barbara ; little Barbara, be faithful to me." It was as though his passion broke bounds for a moment, and he was compelled to speak, though only vaguely, and in a sense that might be mistaken. It seems strange that he had never betrayed himself all this time, that he had kept this sweet secret of his locked up in his own heart, so that not even the woman he loved guessed at it ; but a hard life had taught Norman patience and prudence, and there was a reason for his reserve.

He was a very poor man when he came to Sunningford as the doctor's assistant, and there seemed little hope then that he would be able to maintain a wife for many a long year to come. To defray the cost of his education his mother had had to sell out part of her little annuity, and that, and the result of his poor earnings kept them very straitly for some time, and not even Barbara, who was most at Oakleigh Cottage, guessed the shifts to which their narrow means reduced them, or how hard it was to keep up the appearance that Sunningford demanded. By and by they got on better ; Norman did literary work, they began to add to their comforts, then to save ; then Norman, elated at the prospect of the small partnership soon to be offered him out of consideration of his professional talent, induced his mother to buy those shares of Dr. Heathcote, which were to enable him to pay his son's heavy college debts. Mrs. Strath, deeply reluctant and yet unable to refuse her son anything, drew out the last of her annuity and placed it in his hands. Norman, intoxicated with the success of his speculation, which was already repaying him far beyond his wildest hopes, still insisted on maintaining their narrow way of life, and spent his professional earnings in buying fresh shares. Dr. Heathcote was doing the same, only more largely.

Norman had hopes now that his goal was in view, in a little while—a very little while—he thought he should be able to keep a wife with comfort—he was beginning to throw off his reserve with Barbara and show her somewhat of his heart ; in his quiet undemonstrative way he was slowly but surely winning her ; on the day before her birthday he had made up his mind to speak at once to Dr. Heathcote.

Circumstances prevented him. With the doctor's illness came a grave delay, by and by other clouds gathered on Norman's horizon ; he was aware of them before, and had treated them lightly, presently he found out they were ominous enough.

A new doctor had appeared in Durnford, that was nothing to excite astonishment, other wandering doctors had come before, but had never stayed long, so great was the reliance of Durnford on Dr. Heathcote.

But this Mr. Murray had no sooner appeared than a clique formed round him, and two or three of Dr. Heathcote's oldest patients were to be found among them ; it did not surprise him, however, that old Mrs. Howden should pay court to the newcomer, and accept meekly such pills and potions as he chose to send her, for Mrs. Howden was given to change her doctor on the slightest pretext ; but that Mrs. Rupert, and the two Miss MacArthurs, who had modest lodgings over the baker's, and Grundel the butcher, who was quite an authority in the village, —that these should throw off their allegiance, and openly declare for the new doctor, was a perplexity even for Norman's astute mind, he could not understand it at all. It might have been revenge in Grundel's case, seeing that his dog had fared so badly in that encounter with Ben ; he had looked very askance at Barbara and her dog ever after, but how about Mrs. Rupert and the Miss MacArthurs ? Miss Kitty MacArthur was thought to have looked rather kindly on Dr. Strath, and had been overheard to say "that she had never seen a better favoured man ;" certain it was, Miss Kitty was always watering her flowers when he passed ; behind the great pots of scarlet geranium or mignonette, there was always a white hand to be seen, and then the blond ringlets bobbing over Miss Kitty's high cheek bones. When Mrs. Baines' baby was ill, she used to waylay him in the shop, sidling up between the trays of hot crusty loaves, full of anxiety to "know how the dear child was," and she would flutter her blue ribbons, and pucker up her features into forced curves and smiles, which ill became the strong-minded sensible face which was hers by right.

Mr. Murray was a widower, and was known to be looking out for a wife ; he had a face and head rather like a hairdresser's block, and he was very tender in his inquiries after Miss Kitty ; there was no watering of the flowers now when Norman passed, and only the stiffest of bows when he met her and her sister out walking : Kate Rupert too had a way of interposing her pink-lined parasol between her and the sun, which was sure to be shining on whichever side Norman passed ; he used to note these things with a smile, by and by he became grave ; a straw will sometimes show which way the wind is setting.

If only Dr. Heathcote could have shown his honest face, the current must have been stemmed, so great and well-deserved was his popularity ; but now he was laid aside, and the mischief was progressing ; Norman was no favourite in Durnford, he knew that well, or in Sunningford either ; it was true the old women at the union adored him, and so did the almshouse people, though they were properly Dr. Heathcote's charge, but a few old women in blue checked dresses represent but a slight share of influence, and the almshouses were a very small affair ; with the rest of his poorer patients Norman was rather an object of dislike, he was too quick and decided, too intolerant of their dirt and pig-headedness, as he called it, he was apt to quarrel with them if they refused to adopt his new theories, he would come down upon them too heavily ; Miss Vokes was bad enough, but Norman was worse, and so those of the Susan Moggs class regarded him with little favour, they would whine and cringe to him before his face, and speak badly of him behind his back, and all because he had not Dr. Heathcote's pleasant ways.

But if it were so with his poorer neighbours, it was worse with the village aristocracy—of which there was a fine descending scale, most subtle and mysterious to uninitiated eyes, beginning at Sir William Travers of Briarsley and ending at Mrs. Baines, the baker's plump wife—with them he was decidedly unpopular, owing to his brusque ways and hatred of all humbug ; he had very small sympathy with ladylike ailments, was apt to prescribe fresh air and early rising, when they hoped for tonics and much indulgence ; he had a habit of telling them frankly there was nothing the matter with them, thereby causing loss to his own pocket ; he had offended Lady Travers mortally by doing this ; she was very wroth with Dr. Heathcote for sending that rough young man to attend her, and there were ominous mutterings in the servants' hall, that Dr. Strath would get his

congé and that Mr. Murray would be sent for, if Dr. Heathcote were not soon about again.

It was this last report that made Norman look grave, knowing as he did that Lady Travers' influence was great in Durnford.

"Mother," he said one evening, as he came in hot and weary, and cast his hat down on the table; "I think it has come to this—that one of these days we shall have to decamp from Sunningford."

Mrs. Strath looked up startled; he was very tired, but there was no lack of courage, or even cheerfulness, in his voice; he seemed rather like a man who has to make up his mind suddenly to do an unpleasant thing, and is glad to get it over.

"Why, Norman, how you talk!"

"There'll be talk enough presently," he observed; "where is Fred Lisle's letter, mother, I want to read it again," and, as she passed it over to him, he sat down, and, spreading it out before him, studied it for a long time with an intent face; it was not Mrs. Strath's way ever to interrupt him, so she waited on patiently till he should speak.

He folded it up presently, with a thoughtful frown; and, tired as he was, commenced pacing from end to end of the little parlour; by and by, as though he felt the narrowness of its limit, he threw the door open, and extended his walk into the hall, it would be the front garden directly, Mrs. Strath thought, and then she began to wax uneasy.

"Norman," she said, as he passed her chair, "will you not tell me what has happened?"

He stopped opposite her with a short laugh.

"I am thinking that you and I will have to start afresh in the New World. Sunningford will soon be too hot to hold me;" he was about to resume his walk, but she caught him by the hand.

"Something has happened, I can see it in your face; why do you talk in riddles?" Then he answered her:

"Lady Travers has sent for Murray—don't look so shocked, mother—do you see which way the wind blows now, there is not room for three such men as Dr. Heathcote, Murray, and my humble self, one of us must go; I am thinking, as I am growing decidedly unpopular, it must be I."

"You unpopular, Norman!"

He laughed mechanically.

"Yes, I; I cannot 'minister to the feminine mind diseased' of Durnford, or make up love philtres and cosmetiques; seri-

ously, mother, but for the old women at the union, my dear old folk of the almshouse, and Lady Hunsden, I don't think I've a single friend at Durnford, and hardly at Sunningford.

"There's Hillyard, and Mr. Herbert, and——"

"Yes, I know, but they are all healthy folk, and bring no grist to the mill; no, when the doctor gets about again, he will find his practice sadly fallen off; that affair of Leigh's has lost him the Ruperts, I believe. They always meant Kate for him."

"But, Norman, who has done this mischief; who was it who set that report afloat in the village that you had lost more fever cases than you ought?"

Norman's brow grew dark—but he did not answer.

"My son, an enemy has done this," and Mrs. Strath spoke in great agitation.

"I have heard one thing to-day," said Norman, hesitating; "that Murray is a *protégé* of Lady Strath, a distant relative of her deceased husband; I am afraid that there is little doubt that she induced him to settle here."

"I knew it—oh, Norman, how she hates you—she will ruin us."

"No, not ruin us, that is not in her power, thank God; but she finds us troublesome neighbours, mother, and will be glad to get rid of us."

"Why did she ever come here?" returned Mrs. Strath. "I suppose because Nigel took a fancy to St. Ronans, and insisted on coming. I know she has tried to persuade him to move, or take a London house—she detests the place—but he will not hear of it, and now Nest is to settle here, there will be less chance than ever of getting him away."

"And so she finds she has made a mistake in coming here at all, I suppose," resumed Norman; "she thought she could gloss over her old dislike, but finds it difficult; well, I shall not be sorry to play into her hands for once."

"You would like to leave Sunningford?"

"No, not like it, exactly, but I will make a virtue of necessity—you see the whole thing lies in a nutshell—every day I am more convinced that there is no room for two such men as Dr. Heathcote and myself; the doctor has no business with a partner at all, an assistant would do; anyhow, I am not the man to play second fiddle in a village; when the doctor gets about again he will right his own practice, I hope; if I stay here, with all this disaffection against me, I shall only

injure it further ; there are evil reports spread about me in the village ; I have the cold shoulder given me on all sides ; if this goes on, Dr. Heathcote must part with me, or lose all his patients."

"Oh, Norman, what shall we do ?" cried Mrs. Strath, with the tears in her eyes.

"Do ; why, I'll tell you ; we will wait till the doctor is in a fair way to do his own work, then I'll sell out of the Spanish mines, realise a little capital, and start off with Fred Lisle to America ; there's a famous opening there they say, and——"

"And I, Norman ?"

"And you will follow me with—with——" he stammered, and broke into a smile.

"Do you think she will come ?"

"Yes, I think she will, mother—there, we have talked enough for this evening, I am off to the pipe-room."

"Yes, but Norman, only one word, why don't you make sure of it, and ask her ?"

"Well, so I will ; I will ask her to-morrow ; there, good-night," and then he went.

CHAPTER XXXI.

LADY STRATH'S REVENGE.

"*Lopez.* Methinks a woman dare not——
Rodrigo. Thou speakest poorly ;
 What dares not woman when she is provoked ?
 Or what seems dangerous to love or fury ?"

FLETCHER.

"Whose warp'd look proclaim
 What store her heart is made of."

SHAKSPEARE.

MRS. STRATH had said "an enemy has done this," could she have seen her now would she have pitied her ? Lady Strath had had a blow.

Other mothers had had similar blows, but this was so unexpected. Lady Strath did not tear her hair, such tearing of hair and rending of garments not being nineteenth-century customs ; she could not cover her comely head with ashes, but she wore her sackcloth inwardly, and her bread was for a long

time very bitter to her. She had been a good mother, she had done her duty; how had she deserved what had come upon her? She could not bring herself to believe that anything so humiliating, so altogether repugnant, should happen to her; had she brought a son into the world that he should grieve her like this?

Lady Strath, returning from a pleasant visit, was met on the threshold by news that Nigel was worse, a message by no means uncommon, as he was given to issue such bulletins when *ennuyé* or in ill-humour. His mother had left him by his own desire, but notwithstanding, he might have taken umbrage at her prolonged absence. Lady Strath, therefore, did not look much alarmed, she only questioned the servants in her usual placid manner; whom had they sent for — Murray or Dr. Strath? was he alone now? did he want her? and so on. The answers were not satisfactory; he would have no one near him; he had forbidden them peremptorily to send for any doctor, and he was continually asking at what hour his mother was due.

"Very well, I will go to him at once;" so saying, and drawing her lace shawl closer round her, Lady Strath rose obediently, and went upstairs; she was well used to these querulous summons to Nigel's room, and weary as she was, she did not keep him waiting a moment.

"Well, Nigel," she said brightly, as she turned the handle of the door; "here is your old mother come back to plague you," but as she came up closer, her cheerful smile died away, he was certainly more ill than she had imagined.

"What have they been doing with you, dear?" she said, in alarm, as she stooped to kiss him; we must send for Mr. Murray at once," and her hand was on the bell-rope, but he called her back.

"Come here, mother. I will not have Murray, I tell you, I will have no doctor at all."

"No doctor, Nigel?"

"No, none; what can they do for me?" he panted.

"You have your old pain again, I can see it, Nigel; at least let me send for Norman, he gave you great relief last time," but he stopped her again, detaining her with his feverish hand, and speaking fast and loud.

"I will have no one, no one, I say; what is the old pain compared to the new? it is tearing me to pieces. Sit down, mother, I want to talk to you; no, not there, nearer to me,

where I can see and touch you. You and I must have a long talk, mother."

The vehemence of his tone, the excitement of his whole manner, filled her with dismay, but she was given to obey him; in his many illnesses he had always ruled her with a rod of iron. Some women love to be so ruled, Lady Strath was one of these. She sat down beside him now, and tired as she was, and sorely in need of refreshment, prepared herself to listen.

Looking at her now, one could understand Nigel's fondness for her, in her soft maternal moods she was a very pleasant sight. There was something restful in her fresh middle-aged beauty as there was in the sober harmony of her dress, from the folds of her silver grey silk and the lace draperies of her shawl to the white unfurrowed forehead and smooth bands of glossy brown hair, there was no unfit crease or wrinkle, nothing to mar comeliness, a calm fair gentlewoman with tender motherly ways and looks. No wonder Nigel was proud of her. She was hiding her anxiety now under a placid smile; she saw that something had happened, that he had that to tell her that might be painful in the hearing; but nevertheless there was no lack of composure in the way she seated herself beside him.

"Well, Nigel, what have you to tell me?" she said, turning her quiet face to him, and then she sat folding her hands upon her lap and waiting for him to speak.

But his next words undid all her calmness.

"Mother, I will have Barbara, I love her and she must be my wife!"

He shot out his sentences like a threefold bolt, their cruel abruptness nearly took her breath away; she put up her hand as though she must ward off a visible blow.

"Barbara! What Barbara, Nigel?"

"Barbara Heathcote, my pupil, the only girl I have ever really loved, the girl whom before heaven and earth I mean to make my wife."

"Nigel, Nigel!" She drew a long breath as though he had hurt her, and the hurt were deadly.

"Why do you look at me like that, mother? What is it to you whom I marry? I will have Barbara and no other."

"You say this to me, Nigel? You dare to say this to me?"

"Why should I not dare? May not a man choose his own wife? I have chosen Barbara."

"Nigel, you will break my heart," and she really looked as though he were doing it, all her fresh colour had died away; she was old and haggard and wan in a moment, years would not have aged her so, but not for that did she bring herself to believe it. "Nigel, you will break my heart; say that you do not mean this thing."

"I am more in earnest than I can tell you, mother; you need only look at me to be assured of that."

"You love this girl? No, I will not believe it."

"Why should I not love her? When it comes to that, a man may love whom he chooses, I suppose."

"Yes, a man; but you, Nigel—ah, no, impossible. I am your own mother, but I tell you frankly I do not believe you; it is a fancy, ridiculous, preposterous, if you will, but don't be disheartened, you will get over it. You have done wisely to tell me; a little time and absence will work wonders."

In his intense surprise he lay and looked at her.

"Leave it all to me," she continued hurriedly; "it is not the first time I have helped you out of a similar scrape. Do you remember Maria? ah, and we had trouble with Gretchen too. I begin to think girls the burdens of my life; it is not all sons that would entrust their mothers with their love affairs, but we have always been such friends. I suppose the girl's ugliness has bewitched you—who is it that calls ugliness fascinating? some French writer, I know. Ah, well, there's no accounting for tastes. If you must have got up a flirtation in this dull place, why did you not choose Hester? Hester is passable looking—but Barbara!"

"Have you quite finished, mother?"

"Wait a minute, Nigel; if I am to help you in this absurd affair, I must know exactly what has passed between you. Of course you have not let the girl know your feelings?——"

Nigel lay still with a curling lip.

"Do you mean that you have, that she has entrapped you into any declaration of love? you have been very imprudent; we shall have to make it right with the doctor, we shall indeed."

"I am waiting till you have quite done, mother."

"It was very wrong," she went on. "I know it is hard for you, being shut up in this dead-alive place, it is enough to make a man commit any folly just to pass the time away; but it is dangerous pastime, meddling with a girl's heart; she may take it seriously, you know, Nigel, and there's no knowing

what fuss may come of it." A dark look on his face warned her that she was trying his patience too far. "Well, never mind," she finished, "it is a very tiresome affair, very; we must spare the girl's feelings as much as we can, and I will promise you to make it right with the doctor."

"Have you said your say, mother?" and his sneer was not pleasant to see.

"Yes," she returned more quietly, taking his hand, but he withdrew it, muttering something that she did not hear. Her temporary alarm was over, she had talked herself into the belief that he had entangled himself in a foolish flirtation, a snare into which he was very prone to fall; it was decidedly odd, that he should choose Barbara as a fit subject for his soft nothings, but the girl was clever certainly, and had talked him into it; she never had approved of those lessons, never, and there should be no more of them, she determined—a piece of reasoning in which Barbara would have entirely coincided could she have known it; she had no pity for the little vixen, as in her charity she called her; she had always thought her forward and presuming, and that she should try to attract her son, was a crime so heinous in a mother's catalogue, that it was never likely to be forgiven; "an impertinent talkative little creature," as Lady Strath mentally anathematised her, while Nigel, frowning as darkly as he knew how, thought how he could best convince his mother of its being sober earnest.

"Have you ever doubted my word yet?" he asked at last angrily.

"No, never," she answered readily.

"Then why do you doubt it now? Look here, mother: we have been very good friends hitherto, I have never hidden anything from you, and I hope I never shall, but it will be all over between us if you refuse to help me in this."

"Did I not say I would help you?" she returned softly.

"Yes, but what sort of help? I suppose you don't wish to drive me wild, but you are about as near doing it as you can possibly be. I declare before Heaven that if you refuse to believe my word any longer I will never speak to you again on this subject, and then there will be an end of all confidence between us."

"Nigel, do you forget I am your mother?"

"No, I do not forget it," he returned vehemently; "but I have never found you wanting in sympathy and love to me before; what has come to you mother, why will you not understand this thing that I say?"

"What is it you wish me to understand, Nigel?" she asked humbly. Though she was his mother, he ruled her with a rod of iron; "you surely do not wish to break my heart; you do not mean to tell me that you seriously love this Barbara; do not tell me that, Nigel, I could not bear it."

"You must learn to bear the truth, I suppose," he answered harshly.

"You love her—you—you—Nigel?"

"Ah, do I not? See here, mother,—she sat where you sit, was it days or was it hours ago, and I stood there and held out my hand as it might be thus, and asked her to be my wife."

"You asked her!" almost shrieked Lady Strath.

"Yes, I asked her; I don't look like one to be refused, do I?" he said proudly. "I wonder how many would say me nay as she did; she would not have me, she shrank away as though my touch scorched her; there was genuine terror in her look and voice, 'not yours, thank God,' I heard her say, and then she left me."

"Impossible!" ejaculated his mother, but there was relief in her tone.

"Does it not seem impossible? I, Nigel Strath, but no, I was not mistaken?" the haughtiness of his manner relaxed, and then changed to deep despondency, "she does not love me, she never will;" and then, in great agitation, "Mother, if you do not get her for me, I shall die," and such a pallor overspread his face as he spoke that it excited her alarm.

"Calm yourself, Nigel; you are making yourself ill. What is there in this girl that you should be rendered so wretched? rouse yourself, be reasonable. She does not love you, you say; that very fact ought to cure your mad passion."

"It only adds fuel to the flame," he returned; "no, no, willing or unwilling, I have sworn she shall be my wife; if she were like any one else, such wooing would have served to win her, but being what she is, I love her a thousandfold more."

Poor Nigel, he had called himself a man, but there was very little of the real manhood in him after all—the real English manhood, of which Norman was so striking a type. The reticence and shy reluctance with which Dr. Strath spoke his feelings were quite unknown to Nigel, he had no notion of keeping his thoughts to himself and living his life silently; perhaps the fact that there was Southern blood in his veins might offer some excuse for his vehemence and warmth of expression.

His mother, despite her fairness, was a quadroon by birth, though Nigel had only lately known that such was the case ; and though his father had been English, yet Nigel had received a foreign education, and imbibed foreign tastes and prejudices ; circumstances had still further developed the warm Southern temperament, passionate, voluptuous, inert, which he had inherited from his mother, so that at all times his vivacity and exuberance of imagination were at striking variance with an Englishman's taciturnity ; added to which, his weak health, and predisposition to indolence, made him at all times appear more boyish than he really was.

So it was that not even the sacredness of love was kept silently to himself, but with the ill-humour of a thwarted child, really suffering, and impatient, and intolerant of the pain, he turned himself to his old adviser and friend, and fretted and chafed after her sympathy and help, in a way that would have excited genuine astonishment in Dr. Strath's mind could he have heard him, and so it was that he got ready that rod of iron with which he meant to sway her to his behests.

For there was one thing inflexible about him, and that was his will, and looking at him in that light, no one could call him specially weak ; he had not Leigh's weakness, for example, but then he had not Dr. Strath's strength ; but his will was enough to bring him into trouble, it would not bend for man, woman, or child ; when he had a fixed idea or plan, which was not often, it was, putting circumstances aside, unalterable ; he would never change, he called that being firm ; he had a great notion of his own force of character. Barbara recognised this obstinate tenacity of purpose in spite of his few words, and trembled. Lady Strath felt it too, for she wrung her hands in despair as she listened to him.

"She has no beauty," she said, striking that everlasting feminine chord,—*"she has no beauty, she has cast a glamour over you, she has not positively a single good feature."*

"Perhaps you are right, mother !"

"She is plain, and little, and insignificant-looking," she continued, warming with her subject ; *"she cannot walk gracefully, she does nothing well that a woman should do well ; she has not a single accomplishment except that endless drawing. Nest, in spite of her deformity and pale face, poor child, is infinitely more attractive and ladylike ; what is there in her, what can there be in her, that you should wish to make her your wife ?"*

"She is Barbara Heathcote," repeated Nigel softly.

"Yes, she is Barbara Heathcote. Oh that we had never come to this place, never seen her, that it were Hester, even, or that foolish Connie—any one but this Barbara. Nigel, I declare to you that I have always disliked the girl, I have had an aversion to her, now I positively hate her."

It was a Parthian arrow flung in a losing battle; but it struck him.

"You will hate my wife, mother; ah, then, indeed it will never be right between you and me, we shall no longer be friends," and as he spoke his face grew hard and cold to her, as it had never done yet.

Then she flung herself upon him, weeping.

"Oh, you will not be so cruel to me,—how can you speak so to your mother?" but he put her from him, not violently, but with an ominous white look that she understood through her tears.

"It is not I who have made this breach, I have acted honestly; I have confided my trouble to you, but you have cast it off from you; you are treating me as though you were my step-mother"—his voice was very mournful. "I did not think it of you, mother."

The rod of iron was well over her now; in all their contests when had she ever gained the victory; had she not always been forced to submit as she did now?

"There must be an end of our confidence," he said again.

"Nigel, you are breaking my heart; what am I to do?" She was yielding now in very trouble; but he was inexorable.

"You must get me Barbara for my wife!"

"I! what are you thinking of? no, I cannot help you there; I will withdraw my opposition, if you will, and leave you free to act; nay, I will speak no evil of the girl, and try, if I can, to think well of her, but it is the bitterest pill I shall ever have swallowed in my life."

"You must do more than that, mother; you must help me."

"How can I help you?" she said rather feebly; "mothers do not generally choose wives for their sons;" in saying which Lady Strath unconsciously lied, for had she not in her mind that very moment the girl whom she had hoped above all others that he would marry, and did he not know that she had so hoped; it was all over now with Clare Travers, however she might turn her bright face elsewhere, for the young master of

St. Ronans saw no beauty in her ; " how can I help you," she reiterated fretfully ; " if you cannot woo this girl for yourself, can I do it for you ? "

That turned him sullen in a moment.

" Well, well," he interrupted impatiently, " I see we shall never understand each other ; say at once that you have no mind to help me in the matter, and let us have done with it. I see I have asked you too much ; there, I have got my old pain again ; talking has made it worse ; never mind, I have only a few short years to which to look forward ; a man can do without happiness, I suppose, if he has not long to live."

That was his master-stroke, a selfish and cruel one. Now, indeed, the iron entered into her soul, she must give in now.

" Oh, Nigel, how can you talk so ? you shall not, you shall not ; my boy lay his death at his mother's door ! There, it shall be as you will, you shall have this Barbara, whatever it costs me."

" There's a darling mother ! "

" She has refused you, you say, she does not care for you ; never mind, I will smooth your way for you. I don't see what good my life is to me, but I will do it for all that."

" Always my dearest friend, mother ! "

" No, not your dearest now," and she shuddered. " Nigel, if you have done with me, I will go. I have to think all this over quietly."

" And you will not tell me how you can help me ? "

" No, you must leave it to me. I think I know where the difficulty lies, but if he thinks to cross me in that," her eyes glittered and looked dangerous for a moment ; " no, no, Nigel, a man's discrimination may be at fault, but a woman's instinct, never ; you have entrusted me with your trouble, leave the future to me, a little time and patience and it will all come right."

A happy look flitted across Nigel's face as he kissed her gratefully, and then he lay back well satisfied, and watched her as she drew her shawl carelessly round her, and swept from the room ; the weight was gone from his heart, he had laid his burden on her, and he knew with a faith that was rare in manhood, that she would not disappoint him ; that, let her employ what means she would, she would somehow compass her ends.

Lady Strath meanwhile had betaken herself to her dressing-room ; if she were tired or faint she did not know it now, her maid was dismissed with orders that none were to disturb her ;

and as soon as she was left alone, she drew her chair to the open window with a feeling that somehow she could not breathe. Lady Strath was not a good woman in the sense that we use the word good ; but neither was she bad, even knowing the mischief she was fated to work hereafter, one could almost find it in one's heart to pity her ; under the old law, it might have been well to stone one's enemy, and we may have wished him to be so stoned, but the sight could never have been a pleasant one.

It would almost have been a relief to Lady Strath, being a woman of strong passions, could she have carried out to the full that rending of garments, and tearing of hair, of old times ; could she have sat in the dust and begrimed herself with ashes, and made known her troubles in a loud lamenting voice, it would have proved a sort of safety-valve to her ; and she would have risen from her great humiliation, when the days of her so-called mourning were over, a sadder and a wiser woman. Neither would she have entangled herself as she did afterwards, in the net of circumstances ; rending the web aside with such unholy hands, and making that crooked that was ordered to be straight !

She might lift up her voice and weep, but she could not call her whole house together to bear witness to her sorrow ; her lamentations must be of the decent nineteenth-century sort ; but as she sat there, she told herself, as she had told Nigel, that her life was no good to her, and her trouble was very bitter.

She had brought him into the world, that he should turn round upon her like this ; she knew—none better—that with all her faults, she had been a good mother to him ; she had neglected Nest for him, she had given her daughter but a few grains of maternal love, and lavished the rest on Nigel ; she had been his companion in health, his nurse in sickness, she had never thwarted him, never been weary ; if he taxed her patience, she did not show it ; when he was ill, she was never away from his side ; fond of gaiety as she was, and courted and flattered, she gave it all up willingly to remain in his sick-room ; she might have married over and over again, but for Nigel's sake : if his caprices were many, her tenderness was inexhaustible, and so it came to pass that they were more to each other than mother and son ; and the years only increased Nigel's chivalrous love for her ; as a boy it had been conspicuous, as a man it was even more so ; often as their wills had clashed together, they had never suffered so severe a shock, or been in such danger of disruption, as on this day in question.

It was not a mere maternal jealousy, or a dread of rivalry that troubled Lady Strath ; she was too true-hearted a mother to fear his marrying ; she desired this, as she desired all other good for him ; she had held out kind welcoming hands to Gretchen ; neither had she been ungracious to dark-eyed Maria ; she would rather her son had married an English girl, and that was all. As soon as Nigel's absurd caprice had brought them to St. Ronans, a place which he chose and to which he obstinately adhered as soon as he heard Norman lived there, Lady Strath's keen eyes had surveyed all the county beauties, and fixed at last on Clare Travers, as being the most beautiful as well as the best bred girl in those parts, save and excepting Hester Heathcote, whose merits Lady Strath strove to decry for reasons of her own.

Those Heathcotes—how she hated them—Barbara especially ; from the time of Nigel's accident, they had been stumbling-blocks and eyesores to her ; Nigel's unaccountable friendship with them, his prolonged stay in the doctor's house, his morbid excess of gratitude, which made him repay a trifling benefit by giving Barbara lessons ; his determined visits and lingerings in the Heathcote garden day after day, and his resolute avoidance of all county society ; all these things were bitter causes for jealousy, and as she dare not resent them openly on her son, she sowed seeds of secret and unavowed animosity between her and the doctor's household ; and being about as unreasonable as a foolish unprincipled woman could be, she chose to trace back the source of all her discomfort, past, present, and future, to Dr. Strath, who had yet further added to his several misdemeanours, that of being a firm friend of the Heathcotes.

There could be no question of any amnesty between Lady Strath and Norman, the thing was impossible ; an implacable nature like hers could not know the meaning of forgiveness. He had injured her boy, he had robbed him of health, not for years, but for a lifetime ; she had hated him then, and she hated him now, all the more that she saw that Nigel had wholly forgotten the old grievance, and that Norman's friendship was becoming a necessity to him ; it was gall and wormwood to have him visiting at her house, and to see the confidence between them. Norman knew that she felt it to be so, and came all the oftener ; if Lady Strath was subtle in her enmity, Norman defied her openly, which made things all the worse when there came to be war between them to the death ; for the straightforward contempt of an honest man is no match for the secret

plottings of an incensed woman, who has but one wish in life, and that is to defeat her enemy by any means, and drive him from the field. Lady Strath was not a bad woman, not wholly bad, that is ; let sensational novelists say what they like, the thing is an anomaly in nature. She did not sit down deliberately to plot and scheme against Norman's happiness or to compass his ruin, such plots and schemings belonging rather to the daggers and poisonings of another age. The devil knows better than to tempt a woman in the present century in that vulgar fashion : would it be likely that a well brought-up gentlewoman who read her Bible, and went to church twice on Sundays—except when it was wet—and gave largely to charities, would sell her soul like that ?

Lady Strath had a young relative of her husband's staying with her, one of whom she was very fond, and a *protégé* of her own ; it was a pure piece of benevolence having him at St. Ronans, for the poor fellow had had a bad illness in London, and country air would set him up ; the only wonder was, when that object was attained that he did not go back to his lodgings in Ampton Street, but kept staying on ; perhaps Robert Murray found his quarters too pleasant, and his step-aunt too kind, anyhow he made good his footing at St. Ronans, and enjoyed the purple and fine linen with the gusto of a young epicurean ; for Robert Murray loved life, and was given to make himself fat on other people's goods.

By and by a lodging was procured for him at Durnford ; it was a pity such good friends should part, as Lady Strath said. People began to shrug their shoulders and ask what he was doing there, the medical profession being well represented in Durnford, an opinion with regard to which Lady Strath begged to differ ; she had heard, she did not know, but she thought, there was some slight dissatisfaction expressed,—the Sunningford doctors were a little negligent in their attentions, their work was too diffusive, spread over too large an area, the people suffered : might it not be well that Robert Murray, quite a rising young man, and well thought of by the faculty, should stay to pick up a few crumbs that the others had let fall ? Old Mrs. Hawkins doted on him, and Miss Kitty MacArthur—well, young folk will be young folk, it was not for her to betray her nephew's secret, and Dr. Strath had certainly treated her badly ; such a bear, my dear, quite a woman-hater, and he to pretend to flirt, and so on, and so on. One would be sorry to follow all the plausible sentences that flowed so glibly into each

other, made up of the half truth, and half falsehood, which is so much more dangerous than a whole tissue of lies.

Presently the innuendoes grew bolder ; there was detraction, doubts of Norman's professional talent ; the old doctor was pitied for possessing such a partner ; he was unpopular in Durnford, people were shutting their doors against him, and no wonder. Susan Moggs' case was shamefully mismanaged, it was not the fever at all ; Mr. Murray had explained it all to her ; and Mrs. Sykes' child—well, it was not for her to repeat village scandal ; Dr. Strath was a well-meaning young man, but country practice, you see, and a small degree of talent were against him ; would mortification have set in, if the limb had been amputated ? no, it is all a mistake, Mrs. Sykes did not prevent him, what woman would kill her child by such obstinacy ? no, she was afraid—here Lady Strath shook her head—she was afraid Dr. Strath had mistaken his profession ; and that poor Dr. Heathcote, if he ever recovered, which was not likely, would find half his practice gone, which, by the bye, was the only true sentence of the whole. For the tide of popular opinion, always fickle and dangerous when set in motion by an unscrupulous hand, was running dead against Norman ; he had got a bad name in Durnford, there was no denying ; and Mr. Murray was now medical attendant at Briarsley, a fact that was soon made patent enough.

Little by little, by degrees, first unconsciously, then by double motives, a twist of truth here and there, an innuendo, a hint, a meaning smile, that's how the devil works nowadays ; and so was Lady Strath whispering and smiling away Norman's good name, and hardly earned reward ; and now that an open and far more deadly temptation awaited her, would she have sufficient principle to resist it ?

Lady Strath knew why Barbara had refused her son ; she had guessed Norman's secret, ay, and Barbara's too, long before Barbara knew it herself ; she knew why Norman was toiling and waiting, and what was the reward he had set before himself, and she knew likewise how unconscious Barbara was : it was by this very unconsciousness that Lady Strath hoped to win.

That Norman should baulk Nigel of what he desired, was an idea not to be entertained for a moment ; he had robbed him of health, of all purpose in life, should he rob him of his wife too ? she detested Barbara, but she had promised Nigel to do this thing, and do it she would ; she would employ all her ingenuity, all her cleverness to this end ; she did not disguise

from herself the difficulty, nay, the humiliation it might entail on herself ; but she knew that her son's heart, it might be his life, so frail and impetuous as he was, was set on this girl, and have her he should.

But how ?

Think over it as she might, till her brain ached, and her pulses throbbed, she could devise no expedient for attaining her object ; she knew Barbara's inflexible honesty would oppose her at all points ; she could not reach her through her heart, for unconsciously she loved Norman, and all pleadings on Nigel's behalf would be fruitless ; neither could she see that any success was likely to arise if she tried to set Norman against her, he would as soon think evil of his own mother as of Barbara.

There was no beating about the bush now, the tempter had found her after all an easy prey ; many half deceits had prepared the way for one great one ; she was determined to win ; could she have found deceit answer her purpose she would have used it without scruple ; she must, she thought, fight Norman with his own weapons, she must use truth to meet his truth, and sound the depths of his generosity ; she had found out the morbid flaw in the strong armour of the man, the one vulnerable part in this Achilles, and through that she proposed to reach him ; she was not wholly bad, for she was doing evil that good might come to her son, she was cutting her own throat, in common parlance, to serve him ; it was true she was injuring her enemy at the same time, and settling old scores with a vengeance, but still, could she have seen herself in her true colours, she would have been the first to cry shame on herself ; and there was sufficient self-respecting good in the woman to ensure an honest repentance, could she have been brought to a knowledge of her sin.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WINNIE'S ENIGMAS.

“ O Moon ! in the night I have seen you sailing
And shining so round and low ;
You were bright ! ah, bright ! but your light is failing,
You are nothing now but a bow.

“ You moon, have you done something wrong in heaven
That God has hidden your face ?
I hope, if you have, you will be forgiven,
And shine again in your place.”

JEAN INGELOW.

MRS. STRATH sat opposite her son in the little room where they took their meals, breakfast was half over, but, as yet, they had interchanged no word.

She had sat opposite him in this way for years, pouring out his coffee and ministering to his wants, and often he had said no word to her, with the exception of his brief morning salutation, or, perhaps, a casual remark about the weather. It might be the man's peculiarity, but he never showed himself specially sociable at this hour of the day ; it was his habit to read his few business letters, mere correspondence for friendship or pleasure not being much in his way, and then he would apply himself to his paper, grumbling a little in an undertone if it were damp or badly folded, scanning its columns hurriedly between every mouthful, with the eagerness of a politician, and only throwing it aside when he had finished his meal.

“ Is there anything in the paper this morning, Norman ? ” his mother would hazard sometimes, when weary of the silence, during which she would be debating the butcher's bill in her mind, and wondering if veal were too dear, and what Norman would like for his dinner, not that she ever dared to ask him, Dr. Strath not being a man given to much consideration of his meat or drink, though very careful of his raiment : his mother had too much tact to strive to rouse him to interest in any of the petty details and incidents of domestic life. Had he been married, there is little doubt that Dr. Strath would have proved himself eminently domestic, and might even have been awakened to something like enthusiasm as to the price of veal, marriage sometimes working such miracles ; but, as things

were, the only safe matter for discussion was the laundress, when Norman would wax eloquent on the subject of buttons and collars ; in this matter, indeed, he was rather given to consider himself an ill-used man, the great grievance being the deficiency of starch ; he would handle his collars, and use strong language as he did so, not always evincing that charity towards his laundress that the Apostle inculcates ; to all of which Mrs. Strath would listen meekly, as befits a woman, after which she would go and wage stubborn war with the delinquent.

She once declared to Barbara that Norman's collars were making her grey before her time. "What I have to suffer, my dear, between him on one hand, and the washerwoman on the other, no one knows but myself ; I begin to dread Saturday, and even Sunday is no day of rest for me."

"If I were you, I would not take any trouble about it," was Barbara's frank rejoinder ; and, to do her justice, she would not ; she would tease Norman sometimes about his collars, putting her little hands to her neck in a strangled sort of way, and suggesting much friction from starch, or she would condole with him on his limp appearance. "Why don't you get rid of your beard, Norman?" she would say to him, "it hides too much of your collar, not but what they are better hidden, if they are always got up like that," no wonder Mrs. Strath declared they were making her grey before her time.

But, to-day being Thursday, there was no talk of laundresses, and, after Mrs. Strath had decided that veal was too dear, and lamb only disguised mutton, and had settled secretly to have beef, and found no longer employment for her thoughts, she had hazarded that inquiry, that there might be news in the paper which might make it worth her while to put on her spectacles.

"News ?—there is never any news," returned Dr. Strath, when this question had reached his ears.

"Really nothing in the paper?" mildly observed Mrs. Strath.

"Nothing at all," was the ready response, as he finished one column and began another.

"Dear, dear, then I wonder what you can find to occupy you all breakfast-time. I wanted to know, Norman——" but what Mrs. Strath wanted to know never transpired ; for at that moment Jeannie entered with a letter, the reading of which took up so much time and incited Norman to such marvellous contortions of face, that Mrs. Strath began to be in a fever of

curiosity, and, at last, when there was nothing but a crooked line between his eyes and hair indicating forehead, she could keep silence no longer.

"Well, Norman——"

"I wonder what mischief she's brewing now?" was the singular response.

"She—whom do you mean, my dear?"

"My Lady——" and then he set his teeth, grinning horribly, and looking highly pugnacious.

"Oh," observed Mrs. Strath, in a meaning tone. "Well, what has she got to say for herself? you used not to be correspondents, Norman?" His only answer to this was to push the letter towards her, which she took eagerly.

It was a civil little note enough, but how Mrs. Strath hated the very sight of the neat writing, and faint perfume with which the St. Ronans' notes were always scented; they seemed to disturb Norman's olfactory nerves, also, for he always threw them from him with disgust. Perfumes were Norman's abhorrence, he had something to say even against the sweet attar of rose, which was his mother's special favourite, but patchouli,—he once caught Barbara using patchouli, and she never heard the last of it.

"It is a very civil note," said Mrs. Strath, "much too civil, I am afraid. Why does she want you, I wonder?"

"That is what I should like to know, you see; she says, 'to talk over an important subject.' I think I shall plead an engagement, she is so very pressing."

"Do you think Nigel can be ill again?" inquired his mother anxiously.

"Well, there's no knowing. How can he help being ill, or fancying himself ill, with nothing to do? I know I should in his place," and Dr. Strath straightened his broad chest and stretched out that strong right arm of his, as though he felt that work was meat and drink—the very breath of life to him. "How a man of Nigel's abilities can dawdle and dream his life away is an enigma to me; it is a fearful waste of talents and substance. Heigho! we can't make other people share our opinions, I wish we could; if only I could have the management of him a little."

"I don't think you would do much with him," returned Mrs. Strath, sighing, for her brother's son was very dear to her.

"Would I not? let me try first. I would make him enter

parliament, or take a farm, a real working farm, I mean ; we should hear no more of heart disease or rapid decline for the next ten years, I'd warrant you. I don't deny there may be latent mischief, but a parcel of old women doctors, to say nothing of his mother, have magnified it tenfold, and frightened him into imagining all sorts of things ; they call temper palpitations,—pshaw, I have no patience with such rubbish."

"But, Norman, he is very delicate ; Dr. Heathcote has said so over and over again."

"Well, of course, he's delicate ; I suppose any one would see that if they used their eyes ; and these excitements into which he puts himself are the worst things for him. I have told him so plainly, and so has the Doctor, but it is not a bit of use ; if people will kill themselves before their time comes for dying, I don't see how the doctors are to blame ; of course, he'll never make an old man, but I don't know that I shall either ; but I am sure of one thing, I shall bide my time."

"But, Norman !"

"Well ?——"

"I suppose you will go over to St. Ronans."

"I don't know. I suppose I shall. I am to make an appointment, she says. Did you say you had asked Barbara for this evening, mother?"

"I did, but she cannot come, her father wants her to go over to Dort's Mill this evening ; you know, I daresay, that the doctor wishes Leigh to come home."

"Yes, I know, we were talking it over yesterday. Hester has objections, but I overruled them. I told them both it was putting Leigh in a wrong position, leaving him so long at the mill ; and as the doctor was against their taking lodgings in Durnford there was nothing but to have them home."

"I suppose Leigh will still go to Briarsley ?"

"I don't know. I think for the present, till something turns up : Leigh wants to enter a merchant's office in London ; so much for his college education ; I don't know but what it will be the wisest in the end, but it is hard lines for the doctor."

"He will feel it dreadfully."

"Yes, and so will they all, Barbara especially. Well, as she is going over to Dort's Mill, I suppose I had better walk up this evening to St. Ronans."

"I don't see how you can get out of it."

"Neither do I, so the matter's settled. I must be off now,

good-bye," and then he closed the door after him, leaving Mrs. Strath to betake herself to the larder or the kitchen, with the one regret uppermost, that veal was certainly too dear.

After that she put on her spectacles, and read the Psalms and Lessons for the day, such being her usual custom, and then she took up the paper that Norman had thrown aside, and applied herself diligently to pick up such crumbs of intelligence as she could glean from the leading article and court circular, after which she darned socks till dinner-time. Not a very varied existence was Mrs. Strath's; but she did not need pity, seeing that she thanked Heaven devoutly every day of her life for the peaceful harbourage to which she had attained; she had had much, and now she had little, but the little contented her; she was a solitary woman in some respects, for though a dutiful son, Dr. Strath held himself somewhat aloof from her, and kept his inner life to himself, but they understood each other, and in her heart she knew that she was more to him than he would permit to be seen.

He was a son of whom any mother would have been proud, but she could not disguise from herself that he failed somewhat in those small courtesies and little demonstrations in which her soul delighted; but she knew also that such was the manner of the man, and took all that was given her thankfully, showing on all occasions such tact and sweetness that she made his home a pleasant place to him. Barbara's visits and her garden were her two thorough enjoyments; when she was budding her roses, or sitting working, with Bab on her little stool beside her, she would not have envied the queen on her throne; and seeing that such was the case, I do not think that in spite of all her reverses Mrs. Strath needs pity.

But the day was not quite so satisfactory to Barbara; great happiness, like great sorrow, is hard to bear; there are breathless states in which intense rapture amounts to a positive pain; the pendulum of our being has swayed to an extreme, it vibrates madly, we are oppressed, bewildered; by and by there will be revulsion, distress; not till the just balance is restored and we have our happiness, as it were, firmly in our grasp, in a visible tangible form, when we are sure it will not melt into thin air, and leave us void of joy—then, and not till then, shall we be at peace.

And already the revulsion had come to Barbara.

Last night she could have shouted aloud in her triumph, she was cured of her blindness, her eyes were open, she could see; the new light dazzled her, and then it became a reality,

a glory, to love and to be beloved, to know it, to be sure of it, this, this was life ; hitherto she had been a neophyte, now the great mystery was revealed to her, every breath she drew was a joy : was there ever such a wondrous story written as that old, old story—old as the ages and new to the end of time—the only and real elixir of life ?

Oh, story that we all try to tell for ourselves, and whose telling is so beautiful in our eyes ! What is it after all but a vast serial written by the king in his palace, and the peasant in his hut, ever to be written and never to be completed, till time shall be no more.

But the revulsion had come to Barbara ; her first waking moments had been delicious, a mingling of bird songs and heart music together, and then came the remembrance of St. Ronans to sober her, and steady the pendulum of her thoughts. She began to understand, as she dressed herself, that his affection would be a thorn in her side, that it would be soreness of eyes to her, that a joy which was built on another's pain could not remain a joy for ever, or was but at best a mixed pleasure ; and, as she thought of it all, pangs of genuine pity began to tear at her heart-strings. "If only he were my brother, and Bab's master, how happy I should be," she said to herself ; "but it is all over with Bab's master," and with feminine inconsistency she began to lament for her lost friend, leaving that other joy to take care of itself ; only now and then there were odd thrills, which made her feel that all was not so sad as she would have herself believe ; in all of which Bab was showing herself a thorough woman.

But do what she would happiness predominated, and she went down to breakfast with the proud feeling of one who had a hidden treasure. She was pale and *distracte*, it was true ; her heart beat so loudly that she was afraid people would hear it ; and if any one looked at her she blushed. Of course she did not eat—grief creates hunger often—grief is exhaustive, happiness excites too much for appetite ; but she sat looking so guilty that of course every one noticed it, and had some remark to make. "She had a headache," "she was unwell," "she had heard some news,"—this last from Connie. Barbara shook her head, and then was terribly ashamed of the implied falsehood. "Why can't you let me alone ?" she returned, with a touch of her old petulance ; "I have slept badly and have dreamed," which was quite true. "Daddy, if you have finished your breakfast, shall I read the debates to you ?

She felt the newspaper would be a refuge ; she was glad to hide her hot face behind it. Her reading was mechanical, but it soothed her too ; she was quite thankful for Disraeli's long speech—she managed to solve a knotty problem for herself while she got through it. Should she tell her father about Nigel or not ? She had always made him her confidant—always ; she had gone naturally to him in her troubles, but now she hesitated ; he was only just recovering from a great shock—it would agitate him ; nay more, from something he had let fall once, she feared it might be a disappointment to him.

No men, however perfect, are without their weaknesses. Dr. Heathcote was not without his ; he was ambitious for his children. Hester's broken engagement with Sir Geoffrey Hunsden had been a great blow to him ; he had never quite forgiven Geoffrey, and he never would. He was not implacable, but Geoffrey was no longer as a son to him ; he would take no favour at his hands ; he spoke of him as a good man, but a man too weak to know his own mind. He believed always that Hester had sustained grievous loss from him ; he treated her at all times as a woman whose heart was broken. "It will go hard with her," he said over and over again ; "she will never marry : and I want all my daughters to be married ; but now the flower of my flock will be left, and no man will gather her ;" and the doctor grieved over her, and would not be comforted.

Barbara knew this, therefore she hesitated ; she would not tell him now, she would wait ; she would not even tell Mrs. Strath. Was she not bound in all honour to Nigel not to reveal his humiliation ? Other girls might vaunt of their triumph, but no such vaunting should be hers. Had she not her secret, and could she tell one without showing the other ? No, she would not confide in her father—not yet, at least ; and having arrived at this determination and the end of her speech together, she folded up her paper, Dr. Heathcote having fallen into a doze, and stole away.

She gardened, she read, she painted, she tried needlework and idleness by turns, but it was the longest day she had ever passed in her life ; it was interminable ; it was not to be measured by ordinary days. Every ring of the bell, every footfall in the passage, brought the colour to her face and made her tremble. All through the long afternoon she dreaded lest Norman should come : she wondered how she would ever bring herself to look at him, and how she should meet his eyes. How

could she speak little commonplace remarks, knowing as she did what he was to her? Would she ever subdue her rebellious blushes, or steady her pulses? If she heard him coming, she would run away; and yet when evening came and no Dr. Strath, she was heart-sick with disappointment.

She put on her hat, and called Ben. Her father wanted her to go down to the mill; the house and garden were becoming like a prison to her in this strong craving for his presence. Perhaps she might meet him in the village; the thought fevered her in an instant; but when she had come to the place where she found Winnie, her step flagged and became languid; there was no hope of him now. Little did she know that but an angle of the wall parted them as he went leisurely on to keep his appointment with Lady Strath.

So heavy were her thoughts, that it was a relief to her when she came in sight of the Mill.

Winnie was in the kitchen-garden, brushing up the red and yellow leaves with a broom she had smuggled from the back premises. It was twice as long as herself, and had to be handled carefully.

Her manner of manipulation was unique.

Bab stood and admired her.

It was a matter of much gravel and few leaves, and the garden paths looked dolorous.

Sometimes she held her broom daintily at the extreme end and swayed it with difficulty to and fro; when it would not move, she dragged it after her; finding that did not answer, and the leverage incomplete, she held it as near the brush as possible. This worked well, only it had the singular effect of bringing the stick smartly on the top of her head. Nothing daunted, however, Winnie rubbed her curls crossly and went on afresh. The path began to have a scratched and unwholesome appearance; the leaves played at leap-frog with each other; the gravelly dust blew in Winnie's eyes, and made her wink and cough; she began to meditate, resting both her fat hands on the broom. "Hem, hem!" coughed Winnie.

"My dear child, what a dreadful mess you are making! Whatever will Mammie Ruth say?"

Winnie winked her watery eyes at Barbara, and then applied her fists carefully for their further ease and comfort.

"They do smart, they do; Miss Barb?" (her name for Barbara).

"Well, Winnie?"

"Ta feyther tell'd me all the story about Ad and Eve, Miss Barb; he teach'd me and Bebe and the 'ittle black kitten, he did."

"Yes, Winnie?"

"All about Ad and Eve, he did—God made them," here Winnie folded her hands and looked reverent—"out of the dust of the earth He made 'em; the big book says so, it do."

"Of course it does, Winnie."

"How did He get the dust out of their eyes, Miss Barb?" pursued Winnie in a reflective voice. Barbara turned her head away in a vain attempt to preserve gravity.

"If I were you I would go in and wash my face, Winnie. You must not brush all the gravel about like that; give me the broom," and Barbara worked hard to restore tidiness. "You must have a little basket and pick up the leaves one by one; mother won't like her broom taken. But it is time you were in bed, little one; the sun has gone long ago."

"The sun's got a yellow face, and goes by-bye in a great pink bed, trimmed all round with gold: I've seed it often. Who tucks him up, Miss Barb?"

"Winnie, Winnie, you are incorrigible."

"Corabel," says Winnie, who had the tongue of a parrot, "there's a 'ittle moon up there; this is a 'ittle one. What do they do with the old moons, Miss Barb?"¹

Barbara remained mute with astonishment.

"Do they cut them up into 'ittle bits to make the stars? Why are you going away, Miss Barb?"

"That child will be my death, Naomi," said Barbara, as she entered the mill-kitchen; and then she related Winnie's odd speeches.

"She takes after Paul," said Winnie's mother proudly; "she has got his forehead and cleverness and all. Ruth was just such another. Ruth, here's Miss Heathcote telling such funny things about our Winnie."

Ruth met Barbara gravely, as she always did now; they were not yet at their ease with each other. With Ruth's new name had come a new dignity—a very sober and quiet dignity, it is true, but it made itself felt for all that. There was something of stateliness, too, a stand-offishness which, gentle as it was, would have made people slow to be familiar with her; they could not have patronised her for example; all of which made Barbara feel that they would not have to be ashamed of their new sister.

¹ A true speech by a child.

There was something quaint too in her loveliness. She had changed her whole style of dress and hair to please Leigh, and, though both suited her, she looked no longer like Ruth Canham. The village schoolmistress would never have worn those trailing skirts, or crowned herself with those thick plaits, after Hester's fashion, any more than she would have worn the loose lace sleeves which showed the white arms to such perfection. She bore herself a little stiffly perhaps, as was natural in her changed dress : it made her feel a little shy and awkward, but it became her to a marvel ; already she looked as much out of place in the mill-kitchen as Leigh himself did. Paul began to apologise for his pipe and shirt-sleeves, and Naomi looked more homely than ever. "Our place is not fit for the likes of her," Paul would say with a rueful glance. "I must buy you a new gown, Naomi, and we must take to sitting in the front parlour, and having a girl," all of which things Naomi skilfully averted ; for she knew that to deprive Paul of his pipe, shirt-sleeves, and great wicker-chair, would have been to rob his life of much of its pleasure.

"I have brought a message from my father, Ruth," said Bab, as soon as she had seated herself ; "he wants Leigh to come home."

Ruth looked a little frightened ; she did not seem to understand.

"To come home, Barbara ?"

"Yes ; but he is not going to leave you behind, don't be afraid," returned Barbara, laughing. "You see Daddy is better now, getting quite strong again, and he wants to have Leigh near him. You know what a great old house it is ; there is room enough for us all and to spare."

"Leigh talked of taking lodgings in Durnford," began Ruth in an embarrassed tone : "but for Naomi's pressing us to remain at the mill, he would have done it long ago ; they are very kind, much too kind, as I am always telling Naomi, but our being here puts Paul out of his ways a little."

"I daresay it does ; but you must not let Leigh think of going to Durnford, Ruth : things are bad enough there already, without his making them worse. They say Mr. Murray is treating Daddy shamefully, stealing away his practice : did you hear how Norman was insulted last time he rode through the village ?"

"Some lads pelted him ; yes, Paul told us all about it : you do not think your father would like us to go to Durnford, then ?"

"I am sure he would not: he does not know half what we do, but things are getting very bad there indeed. No, you must make up your mind to come to us, Ruth: Daddy must not be disappointed. We all think it will be the best thing for Leigh to come home for a little, and then they can talk over his future, and make arrangements for him."

"If Miss Heathcote has no objection," stammered Ruth.

"Hester—ah, no," returned Barbara quickly; "she and Dad have settled it all between them; she is fitting up a little sitting-room for you, so that you may not be with us more than you like. You are not coming as a visitor, you know, Ruth, but as Leigh's wife, and you must try to feel at home with us all."

"You are very good," said Ruth, and she turned her head aside, rather proudly Barbara thought, but in reality because her eyes were full of tears; but she was spared further reply, for at that moment Leigh came in.

"What, is that you, Babchen?" he said, embracing her boisterously; for things were going well with him at present, and he had recovered much of his boyish spirits. "What brought you over here this evening, little woman?"

"She has a message from your father," interrupted Ruth: "he wants you to go home."

Leigh turned towards her in bright surprise.

"Do you mean we are to go to Heathcote to stay?"

"Yes, he wishes it. Is it not good of him—of them all?" continued Ruth. She might have left the message for Barbara, as she had walked all that distance to tell it; but in these early days she showed a sort of jealousy over her young husband; she could not bear even such telling of good news to reach him but through her. Barbara had instinctively perceived this trait in her, and it made her sore with an odd soreness. "She need not be jealous of me now," said poor Bab to herself, "I shall never monopolise him any more;" and then she would grow very brother-sick. She did not stop to analyse Ruth's jealousy, or she would have found out that it came from a sense of her inferiority: she was his wife, truly, but she was lowly born, and his sisters might look down on her; in spite of her happiness, she could not forget that. "Is it not good of him?" she repeated. "Dear Leigh, I am so glad for your sake that you should go home."

She had whispered this last, touching his arm gently. She almost wished Barbara were not there, that he and she might

have this joy to themselves ; he answered her with a kind glance, but his first burst of gratitude was for Barbara.

"This is all your doing, Barbara darling," he said, with one of his old caresses ; but Barbara disclaimed it.

"It was Norman's thought, not mine, Leigh. I should never have dared propose it ; but Daddy wants you so. You and he will have long talks together, and then it will be settled whether you go to London or not."

"I must go to London," he rejoined ; "a man with a wife cannot live on seventy pounds a year. So I am to come back to the dear old place, am I ? What a fine time we'll have ! I must smoke a pipe in the den, Bab, and you shall spin a long yarn, just for the sake of old times. Hurra ! long live the Pater !" and Leigh, as much a boy as ever, flung up his cap, and caught it. "God bless him ! for there's not such another in the world, and never will be !"

"You are right there, Leigh," said Bab, with just a tremble in her voice.

Ruth stood apart, a little sad and drooping ; he had forgotten her, then, in his happiness. Might it not be best that they two should be left to struggle alone ? Perhaps in his father's house, with his old surroundings, she might be less to him than she was here. She did not recognise this phase of Leigh's character ; to her he had never been boyish or boisterous : the Leigh that Barbara loved was a person unknown to Ruth.

"Are you so tired of the mill," she said in her grave full voice, "that you should be so happy to get away from it ?" and her great eyes were full of gloom as she looked at him.

Bab stared a little, and turned away impatiently. "She has everything, and yet she is not contented," thought Bab wearily ; "if I had—I know what—to call my very, very own, I would never be jealous, or say one word of reproach !" and she grew a little scornful over Ruth's disconsolate speech. But Leigh knew better : love had taught him many things, and he understood the proud humility that belonged to Ruth's nature.

"We have been very happy here," he said in the low voice that had first won her from the path of duty ; "but I am glad to go home. I think I am most glad, because then they will learn to know and love my wife, but not as I love her ;" and then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I must go home now," said Barbara. "I will bid good-bye to Naomi ;" but she did not for some time ; she went to the open lattice in the outer kitchen, and looked out into the

dusky orchard, where Paul was filling Naomi's apron with wind-blown apples. Winnie had had her pinafore full too, but they had dribbled all out at one end, while she was hard at work munching a large red one. The young crescent moon of which Winnie had spoken peeped at them between the merry boughs. "It's a rare night for the stars," said Paul.

"Ay, Paul, that it is," she could hear Naomi reply. "I won't mind to carry any more. Come along, Winnie; little girls ought to be by-bying, and not wetting their feet with the dews."

"I've bitten two rosy-cheeks," said Winnie. "I didn't stealed the broom, mother; I asked it to come out a-walking, and it comed; it's knocked me on the head, and it's very sore. Is the angels singing to Bebe now? Yes, very much, thank you, amen. I won't say no prayers to-night, feyther, but I want my boots off——" The rest of Winnie's sleepy sentence was lost on her father's shoulder.

"Good-night and good-bye," said Barbara cheerfully, as she went back to them. "I don't want you to come with me, Leigh;" and then she went home through the dark lanes, wondering what that weight meant at her heart.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NORMAN'S VOW.

* * * *

"'She was his joy,' he said, 'his comforter.'

But he could trust me. I was not debarred
Whate'er my heart approved to say to her.

Approved! O torn, and tempted, and ill-starred,
And breaking heart, approve not nor demur;
It is the serpent that beguileth thee
With 'God doth know' beneath this apple-tree.

"Yea, God doth know, and only God doth know.

Have pity, God, my spirit groans to Thee!

I hear Thy curse primeval, and I go;

But heavier than on Adam falls on me

My tillage of the wilderness; for lo!

I leave behind the woman, and I see,

As 'twere, the gates of Eden closing o'er

To hide her from my sight for evermore."—JEAN INGELow.

WHILE Barbara was the bearer of good tidings at the mill, Dr. Strath was girding himself up for his encounter with Lady Strath.

Dr. Strath was a man much given to girding himself up on all occasions ; he could do his duty as well as any other man, according to his light and the measure of the strength within him ; he was not one to make much of the toughness of any job. He was accustomed to say that complaining would weaken a Hercules ; he had small sympathy for any one who dwelt largely on their own feelings, and treated the vapours of his richer patients with a caustic dryness that made them vow all manner of feminine vengeance against him. It might have been honest, but it was hardly politic or agreeable. A man, to be perfect, ought not to disdain the courtesies of life. To deal largely in golden deeds one need not dispense with the smaller and less useful change ; but Dr. Strath did not aim at perfection, and merely bore himself so that his daily work might be done and his daily life lived without the soil of any special reproach. He had had his ambitions, but they were dead ; and though he would have scorned to complain, the narrowness of his circumstances crushed him.

He regarded Lady Strath as his enemy, and hated her honestly ; it would have pleased him to speak his mind out to her ; he had a feeling that he must do so very strongly one of these days, but none the less would he have heaped coals of fire on her head when the time for so heaping them came.

But there was one privilege which he always reserved for himself, and that was the absence of any outward subservience of look and bearing ; he owed it to his honesty to be as little gracious and conciliatory as possible to his enemy ; he would button himself up tightly on such occasions, and stalk into her presence with as black a brow as possible ; until the time came for the coal-heaping he would never allow by word or look that he was not absolutely hostile to her.

On the present occasion he was very implacable ; she had challenged him to this encounter ; she had named time and place ; she had put, as it were, the weapons in his hand : he would deign no graciousness or infuse any cordiality into his greeting ; if the conversation could be guided into his hands he vowed to himself that it should be the briefest they had ever had. She had wronged him as no other woman had ever wronged him, and it would need all his self-control to refrain from telling her so, but, if he could, he would so refrain ; so much he promised himself as he crossed the threshold, and his mind was still more made up when he was ushered into the immediate presence of his enemy.

Hitherto he had always been kept waiting, but now he had hardly time to assume his blackest aspect before she came up to him and laid her hand on his arm with a light pressure.

"Norman, I am so much obliged to you for coming to me," she said, and she almost drew him to a seat; with his quick instinct he detected in a moment her paleness, and the involuntary trembling of her voice, and that she did not raise her eyes to his as she spoke to him. It might be that the time for that coal-strewing had already come, but he made up his mind that whatever he had to hear he would hear standing; it made him more conscious of his strength and independence; it had always given him an advantage over her in their talks. Lady Strath was wise enough to know this as she strove to draw him to a seat, but he was determined that no seat should hold him.

"Thank you, I will not sit down; of course, as you sent for me I have come, Lady Strath;" and then there was a moment's silence between them. She was measuring the man's strength, and considering what she should first say to him; but he would give her no opening.

"I am in great trouble," she said to him at last, and then she looked him full in the face.

He bowed in silence.

"Such trouble and perplexity have come upon me that I do not know well how to bear it. I do not think any other woman is tried as I am tried."

Another stiff bend of the head; it roused her into quick speech at last.

"Norman, if you do not help me, I don't know what I shall do. Nigel is ill again."

"I am sorry to hear it, Lady Strath,—more sorry perhaps than surprised;" and then again he inclined himself to listen.

"How coldly you speak! We have not been good friends, Norman, but I think you might forget all that now when we are in trouble; at least, a generous man would not remember it. And there is my poor boy suffering, and you will not stir a finger to help him." It was weak and puerile of her, and roused all his contempt.

"At least I have stirred a foot," he returned drily. "If you have sent for me to tell me Nigel is ill, I am very sorry; it is a sad thing to see time and health misused as he misuses both. I don't think I ever heard of a sadder case. If you wish me to see him as a friend I will do so, but if it be my

professional aid you require I must decline ;” but she interrupted him hurriedly :

“No, no, there is no need of that ; he will see no doctor, and if he would my step-nephew, Robert Murray, would attend him.” She was a clever woman, but she had better not have said that ; one may not be timorous, but it is scarcely wise to flaunt a red rag before a bull unless one has a taste for roaring. For all Norman’s black looks and surly answers she might have held her peace about Robert Murray. It was a little bit of feminine spite that cost her dear in the end.

“Mr. Murray is attending Nigel, then ?” He would never show, if he could help it, any professional discourtesy to the interloper.

“Yes ; we thought it better. Dr. Heathcote has such old-fashioned notions ; we don’t think he quite understood Nigel’s case. And Robert Murray is such a clever young man ; you should hear what Lady Travers says about him.” She could not help this thrust ; but she stopped as a sneer crossed Dr. Strath’s face. She had made a mistake.

“Thank you for bringing up the subject,” he replied ; “it is one on which I have long wished to speak to you. There is no time like the present opportunity after all. Dr. Heathcote and I are deeply indebted to you, Lady Strath, for the way you have been busying yourself in our affairs.”

She bit her lip ; she had made a mistake indeed.

“I suppose it is a pleasant sight to a woman to see the man whose character she has slandered away. I don’t think a man would feel it so ; but there is no accounting for tastes. I scarcely see the necessity for such hatred ; but as far as Durnford and even Sunningford is concerned, I am as good as ruined.”

She kept her eyes from him and paled visibly.

“I do not understand you, Norman,” she stammered. His face was not good to look at.

“I don’t know but what killing a man by inches may be equivalent to murder. I do not wish to call a woman hard names, especially when she has been my uncle’s wife. I suppose you have slandered me about as foully as a man can be slandered ; my wonder is that a lady can soil her hands with such work.”

“I do not know what you mean,” she said again ; and this time she tried to raise her eyes to his face, and failed, but inwardly she groaned and called herself a fool.

"I certainly did not think that my words contained any obscurity, but if you wish, I will speak plainly. I do not know why I should be standing here in your house, Lady Strath; for you have injured me in a way no man can forgive."

"Not if I ask you to forgive me, Norman?" she said almost inaudibly.

"I do not think it should be asked or even named between us," he returned quickly; "if I said I could forgive you I should lie heartily. You have wronged me with the bitterest and most insufferable wrong, and I will not be hypocrite enough to say that I shall ever forget it."

"He was my husband's nephew; why should I not have him here?" she answered, trying to defend herself feebly; "surely there is room enough for another doctor. I do not know why you should be so hard upon me, Norman, because I try to befriend a poor relation; if he interferes with you or Dr. Heathcote he shall go. It is not my fault if people like him better than they like you."

"Did Robert Murray tell you how the lads pelted me in the Durnford lanes?"

"He was very sorry, very sorry indeed," she returned quickly; "and I was sorry too."

"I can believe it, Lady Strath. When I think of my injuries I almost forget the respect I owe you as a woman. It is a mean treacherous trick you have been serving me. I don't know that the sweetness of the revenge may be quite so palatable when I tell you that, in spite of its blackness, it has done me good. It makes the saying of my prayers a difficulty, perhaps; but many a better man than myself may find it hard to forgive some trespasses."

"Norman, I have not been good to you, but you must forgive me;" but the blackness of his brow was odious to her.

"I am burning with righteous indignation. I should think myself mean-spirited and little to forget such wrongs as mine. I could have forgiven you that smuggling in of Robert Murray; I could even have forgiven that mean poaching of his on other men's manors; but those innuendoes—those slanders you have cast on my professional character—it is that I cannot and will not forgive."

"I only said what I thought was true, Norman."

"You thought it true that I mismanaged Susan Moggs' case," he retorted fiercely—"that it was not fever—putrid reeking fever too? You believed that, in that other case, I

deferred amputation till mortification set in, and that the poor child lost its life through my carelessness? you believed this? You know that you lie when you tell me this, Lady Strath."

His wrath was intolerable to her; she shrank away from the finger of his scorn as he pointed it at her; he was a hard man in his dealings at times, and she had tried him beyond his strength. Though he felt that good was coming to him out of all this evil, he could not forbear overwhelming her with his bitter anger; she had roused a spirit very rarely roused in Dr. Strath, and it was mastering him; she had put the weapons in his hand, and he was using them with a vengeance, and now she was shrinking from his stabs.

"Norman, Norman, will you not hear me?"

"No! you have sent for me here, and you shall listen to what I have to say. Why should I have pity on you who have never shown any to me? I wonder you can lie down on your bed at nights and think how you have injured Dr. Heathcote, taking mean advantage when God had smitten him in his trouble. He has come back to his work, and found bitter ravage—half his practice gone; and when he turns to me for help I am the last man who can give it to him. I suppose if you were drowning I should plunge into the river to save you, Lady Strath; but I don't see how else I can be induced to show you mercy."

"You must show it me now," she said, catching at his words; and she rose and put her two hands on his arms pleadingly. Bitterly as he hated her, and righteous as was his anger, he could not but pity her, as she stood there hardly able to support herself, with the tears rolling down her face; looking at her in the full light, he could see the wrinkles and lines that marred its smoothness, and the streaks of grey in her hair that he had never noticed before; enemy as she was, and cruelly as she had used him all his life, he could not forget just then that she was Nigel's mother.

"You have brought it on yourself, Lady Strath; you and I should never have had this talk;" and then he tried somewhat gently to reseate her; but she would not quit her hold of him, and he was obliged to place himself beside her.

"You have been very hard to me," she said at last. "I am a proud woman, but I think for Nigel's sake I could even kneel to you," and then she grew almost suffocated with her sobs.

"If you have anything to tell me about Nigel I will listen

to you," he answered, and his tone was softer. "You and I ought never to speak of ourselves to each other, Lady Strath; but if it concerns him I will hear you."

"It does—it does. Oh, Norman! if you knew what I am suffering you would pity me—to think that I should come to you, to you, for this thing!"

"What thing, Lady Strath?"

"To save him. He is ill, he has his old pain, he looks death-like, and he will have no assistance; and all because his heart is set on this girl!"

"What girl, Lady Strath?" and then, as a sudden light dawned upon him: "Do you mean he is in love with Hester?"

"With Hester! Oh, that it were so! but it is far, far worse. But he is not to be reasoned out of it—unhappy mother that I am—he loves Barbara."

"Barbara?"

"Yes, Barbara—Barbara Heathcote. Can you conceive it? I beg your pardon, Norman, I believe you like the girl yourself." She had not meant to say this, but the look of his face compelled her, such a flash of his eye as answered her.

"On your peril, Lady Strath!" he said menacingly; and the roughness and loudness of his voice were dreadful to her.

"No, I will not—I did not mean to offend you," she cried piteously. "See how humble I can be for my boy's sake. When he told me yesterday, I would not believe him; I would not till he made me. He swore before heaven and earth he would make her his wife: he is quite mad—quite!"

Dr. Strath shuddered.

"He loves Barbara Heathcote—he will have her! But he cannot; she is mine, Lady Strath."

"Have you asked her, Norman?"

"No, I have not asked her; but what does that matter? It is all no good speaking of this. Do you think I shall let him rob me of my one ewe-lamb when he has everything—everything?"

Then she almost cast herself upon him in her despair. "Norman, if it would help me, I would grovel on the ground before you. I have been your enemy, I have used you badly, I will admit anything and everything; you shall put your foot upon me, if you will, but spare my boy."

He tried not to show his disgust at her cringing; perhaps her sorrow touched his better nature.

"I am sparing him, Lady Strath," he answered as gently as he could.

"No, no ; you are visiting your anger on him. And he, what has he done to you ? You have made his life bitter to him, a long weariness and pain ; has he ever known what health means, and all through your fault ? and now you are going to make death preferable to him," and she wept aloud.

The stubborn look came back to his face. "The old grievance, the old wrong ! God forbid that all our childish wrong-doing should be so remembered by Him."

"Is it for me to forget it, who am his mother ? Do I not know the weariness that his life is to him ? and now if you take Barbara from him, he will die. Norman, did you not say that if the time should ever come for you to do good to him, you would do it, even at your own cost ? Are you less generous than you were in your boyish days ?"

He caught his breath once as though he had been struck, and, steadily as he bore himself, a paleness crept over his face as he listened to her ; her light touch on his arm was insufferable to him ; he released himself, though not without difficulty, and stood erect.

"You are not going to leave me ?" she pleaded.

"Why should I not leave you, Lady Strath ?" he answered ; "there is nothing more that I can say." Then she interposed herself between him and the door, holding out her hand as she did so.

"You will not tell Nigel this that has passed between us ?" she implored.

"Why should I not tell him ? You must let me judge of that ;" but still she would not let him go.

"It will undo all my work," she persisted. Then he turned upon her with a fiercer frown than she had seen yet—

"No, I will not spoil it : it is as pretty a piece of work as the devil has ever devised, or woman has woven ;" then he got himself out of her presence, still with that dour look on his face.

He wanted to prove to himself that she had lied ; there was a load on his heart that seemed to suffocate him ; he stood still for a moment, to take, as it were, fresh breath, and then he went up to Nigel's room.

He knew where he should find him ; he went straight up to the bed, putting back the curtain with no very gentle hand. He wanted to prove that she had lied ; but the first look at the

haggard flushed face told him she had spoken the truth ; his heart felt like lead within him, but his face was grimmer than ever.

"You are in bed betimes," he said somewhat roughly, and then he dropped the curtain and sat down wearily on the edge of the bed.

"Perhaps so ; you would be there too, if you had this pain," was the ungracious answer. It only needed a glance to see Nigel was in one of his worst humours.

"Hum ! perhaps I might. Does your head ache, Nigel ?"

"Confound your questions," pursued the other ; "if you come up at this unearthly hour as a medical decoy-duck, I would thank you to go down again, and tell my mother I said so."

"Don't trouble yourself ; I'll leave that to Murray. Of course you're ill again, and of course I am not surprised ; seriously, Nigel, I would think twice about that farm."

There was a muttered something not very complimentary to Dr. Strath.

"I am speaking for your good. Sir William Travers would let you have it to-morrow. There is one going for a song—only capital required : take it, Nigel, and we shall see you an old man yet."

"Keep your advice to yourself," returned Nigel in a displeased voice ; "it is thrown away upon me, Norman," and he flung himself restlessly back upon his pillow.

"Yes, it is thrown away, I know," replied Dr. Strath, in the same indifferent voice. He had never once taken his keen eyes off Nigel. "Some men would think even manual labour better than sitting still and crying for the moon. I should have thought you, for one, would have had enough of meddling with women."

Nigel looked at him, too astonished to speak.

"I know all about it," went on Dr. Strath ; "don't fly at me, Nigel : there can be no harm in your mother telling it, or my listening, I suppose. You are not fond of my advice generally, I know, but I recommend you to try and get over this as soon as you can ; you have made a mistake."

"Mistake ?" shouted Nigel.

"Yes, a mistake," repeated Norman, in the same cold tone ; "and if Barbara be the girl I think her, she will have nothing to say to you."

He had angled roughly in troubled waters, and the very

roughness of his bait took ; out it all came in an angry tide from Nigel's sore breast, the bitter unpalatable truth ; and Norman knew the man whom he loved as a brother, whom he had injured and sworn to cherish, was snatching his ewe-lamb from him, and his heart died within him and became as a stone.

"Nigel, I will hear no more."

"There is no more to say ; you know it all now. Deride me if you will, but if I do not get her I shall die."

"Then die," was on Dr. Strath's lips, but he forbore. "If you were like any other man," he said at length, "I should despise you for what you have said to me ; but being what you are, good-night."

"Is that the way you treat my confidence, Norman ? are you angry with me ?" and Nigel's voice was faint as he spoke. "What is the matter ?"

"There is nothing the matter," returned the other, with ashy lips, as he rose, and then he put his hand on Nigel's pulse. "Nigel, Nigel, how often have I warned you against those agitations ; none but cowards are suicides, and this is suicidal. Lie still, I will not have you answer," and he stooped over and wiped the cold dew from Nigel's forehead as tenderly as a woman ; "there, you are better now. You should not have talked like that, and over-excited yourself, when your pain was on you ; it might cost you your life any day," and then he sat beside him gloomily a while, till the faintness passed.

"I may go now ?"

"Yes, you may go ; but do not send any one to me : I want to be alone. I am used to these attacks : you may think it folly, but they are worse since I have had this—this trouble."

"That is because you have not the manhood to bear it properly. I did not mean to be angry with you, Nigel ; I believe you can't help it. There, we will say no more about it ; you had better keep your confidences for your mother, another time. I only wish that one of us had never been born."

"Why do you wish that, Norman ?"

"I think we were born to be soreness of eyes to each other, I will think over what you have said ; and, Nigel, do not despair."

"Do you think I shall have her yet ?"

"You may ; I can't tell. There, good-night." His heart was dead within him, but he must not let himself think for a

moment ; he had a little work to do before that ; he had a visit to pay on his homeward road, and then there was that good-night to his mother. There would be plenty of time presently to have it out with himself ; he had not yet looked it in the face ; he only knew that she had not lied, and that his heart was dead within him.

He sat a long time by a dying child, who would hold his hand to the last ; it was a poor crippled boy, of whom he was very fond ; he said a kind word or two to the stricken parents, and took a little sister on his knee to comfort her, and then he went home.

Late as it was, he knew he should find his mother up ; he would have given much to have it otherwise, but he thought a brief word would content her, and put on as cheerful a look as he could muster.

But as he stooped to kiss her, he saw that in her face that told of fresh trouble.

"You are late up to-night, mother."

"Yes, I am late up. Where have you been, Norman ? It is twelve o'clock, is it not ? and I have been sitting here waiting to speak to you."

"You have something to tell me, mother : it is no good news, I can see by your face."

"Yes, I have something to tell you, but I don't think it will get itself said to-night." Her voice shook, and he could see that her hand was closing and unclosing tremulously on an unsealed paper ; she sometimes opened his business letters for him : this evening's post must have brought him ill news. For a moment he seemed as though he would put it from him, and then he held out his hand mutely ; if he had to suffer, might it not be as well that it should come all at once on him ? but, looking in his face, she saw that he had no suspicion of the truth.

"I do not doubt that you will bear it as a man," she said ; "it is but a fresh beginning, and your hands are young and strong—I thank God for their strength. It is worse for the doctor." Then he stooped and took it from her, turning his back to her as he read it, as though needing the light.

But he knew, before he touched it, what she meant, and that he was a stricken man.

She could only see the broad line of his shoulders ; she rose and touched them softly. "Norman," she said ; then he turned round and smiled at her, but his smile was awful.

"It is all over now with Barbara, mother ; the game is played out."

"My dear !"

He struck the paper with his great hand, and then crumpled it into nothing and hurled it from him.

"It is only the poverty of Lazarus," he went on with a fierce laugh : "the poor have no need of wives ; it is only a luxury for the rich. You must cast in your lot with me, mother ; it is for the New World now. Those cursed mines ! —if they had spared your annuity and the doctor's grey head, I would have forgiven them."

She cast about in her mind for some word that might comfort him, but she could think of none ; she would have caressed him, had he been a man who would have permitted such softness ; her hand wandered lovingly over his coat-sleeve, but could find no resting-place ; she would have liked to have crept closer to him in their trouble, and covered his face with her tears and kisses, but he could not have borne it.

"God is good," she said ; and then her voice stammered and broke, and her knees trembled under her. "If you would only sit down and let us talk over this, Norman," she pleaded ; but he would not.

"I cannot talk, mother," he returned vehemently ; "will talking mend our shattered fortunes ?" and then as her patient grief smote him : "You must go to bed, mother, and pray for both of us, if you can ; for I have that to face to-night that might try any man's courage." Then she knew things were desperate with him ; she lingered by his side a moment with a whispered blessing, and went her way.

He was standing when she left him ; but, as soon as she closed the door, he dropped into a chair, leaning his head upon his hand heavily, and there he sat till dawn.

"I have that to face that would try any man's courage," he had said to her, and he knew, as he said them, that it was the bitterness of death.

He was a poor man. The Spanish mines in which Dr. Heathcote had so largely invested, and had persuaded Norman to take shares, had proved the bubble of a mock company, which had suddenly burst and engulfed them in ruin.

Every penny of his hoarded savings, the remainder of his mother's annuity, even the accumulated dividends, had been swept away : the only difference between his ruin and his partner's was that Dr. Heathcote's was more absolute ; he had

incurred larger liabilities, and as all his professional earnings were invested in different parts of the same concern, there was danger that he owed more than he would ever be able to repay. This was all that came of his long self-denial and devotion to a distasteful life—dislike, persecution, the slanders of an enemy, the weak credulity of village bores : poverty more intense than he had known for years, the crushing of all his hopes, and a long exile from all that he best loved.

And now Nigel wanted Barbara : alas, had he not registered a vow long years ago, that he would make any sacrifice to efface the memory of that boyish mischief? He loved Nigel, and he had sworn this thing concerning him. It never occurred to him that the man might release the boy's obligation ; or if it did occur to him, he shuddered away from it. He remembered how he had knelt down beside his bed, and prayed that he might do something for Nigel's happiness before he died, and how he vowed that he would do it at whatever cost ; he had sworn it not once nor twice : every time he looked at the wreck he had made—yes, even in after years, when he remembered it, he had sealed it again and again ; and now the light of his eyes was gone from him, and his life was barren of all joy. It never occurred to him to consider Barbara's happiness in this ; he had long felt that she was to be won, but he little knew of the deep love that was stirred within her ; he treated her reverent fondness for him as a girl's innocent fancy, but he had small hope that if both were offered her, that she could prefer him to Nigel, with his man's beauty and wealth ; he could never have brought himself to believe that she had already refused Nigel, for his sake. Lady Strath had kept that little episode to herself, and Barbara was never likely to tell him ; and so it came into his dull masculine mind that he had only to go away, for Nigel's claims to be preferred and accepted.

If he could have hesitated in this self-abnegation, the heavy losses he had incurred effectually prevented retreat ; if he could have made up his mind to brave everything, he was as far from winning Barbara as ever. He knew that he was in the same position as when he first entered Sunningford, that with the broken practice his profits as junior partner were scarcely more than when he was the well-paid assistant ; he had nothing to fall back upon ; he would not be able to marry for years—perhaps never. Should he sacrifice Nigel, ay, and Barbara too, for the poor comfort of seeing her daily, and wearing his

heart away with the desire to possess her? No; it was better to make a virtue of necessity, and leave Nigel to win and woo her, and forget that he had ever seen the face that was better to him than all beauty. She would have cared for him, if he asked her, he knew; but now he had only spoken a few vague words, which she had not seemed to understand.

He wondered what she would have said if she knew what he felt for her; and then he remembered how he had bidden her be faithful; and he thought he would say a word or two that should make her comprehend his changed position. She might not have understood him, but nevertheless there must be no mistake; he would take some opportunity and tell her that he should never marry; it would allay any scruples that might arise in her mind, and leave her free to act as she chose. And then he thought what a grand thing it would be for her to marry Nigel,—how her fresh nature would strengthen and brace his; but it was not possible to follow out that thought, it made him so sick with pain. But Nigel was rich and generous; he would help them in this strait, and settle Leigh. "Yes, it was all for the best," he sighed, and then he took a letter from his pocket and read it.

He had carried it about for days, though he knew it wanted an answer. It was from his old chum, Fred Lisle, the same who had told him about that opening in New York. They were to buy a practice between them, just vacant by the death of an English doctor; this was now impossible for Norman, but he knew of means for borrowing the necessary outlay. It was a daring speculation, but it promised to turn out well, and Fred urged him to come at once; he had been so urging him ever since he heard of the Durnford troubles. Norman knew that Dr. Heathcote would be grieved to part with him, but he also knew that every day only increased their embarrassment with regard to each other. Dr. Heathcote would soon be back among his patients; and now Dr. Strath was resolved on his emancipation. The doctor would be back at his work again; and there was a great dearth of labour. Why should he not go at once? He had few arrangements to make, few leave-takings; his mother might follow at her leisure, when he had got a place for her. "We must knock the nail on the head at once," wrote Fred; "don't stand shilly-shallying with the old women at Durnford; break with the doctor,—trust me he will be too willing to let you go; get the necessary money, and start by the next mail. There is a hint of opposition in this

quarter from a thorough-bred Yankee. Come at once, like a good fellow, and start me out of my difficulties."

"There's nothing to be gained by waiting," said Norman thoughtfully, as he laid down the letter. "I'll write for the money now, and to-morrow I'll speak to the doctor;" and then he got up and stretched himself and shivered, and walked slowly up and down in the grey morning light. He had a great deal to do before breakfast-time, but he got through it all, and saw a patient besides; only when his mother sat down opposite to him, she thought he looked ten years older, and there was a hard bitter line round the mouth she had never noticed before.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BARBARA'S TRIAL.

"In the cruel fire of sorrow
Cast thy heart; do not faint or wail;
Let thy hand be firm and steady,
Do not let thy spirit quail;
But wait till the trial is over,
And take thy heart again;
For as gold is tried by fire,
So a heart must be tried by pain."

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTOR.

THE same post that brought such bitter news to Norman conveyed the same disastrous tidings to Heathcote House, only with this difference, that the doctor had a few hours' reprieve.

Hester pondered long over the crabbed characters and yellow seal of the foreign-looking letter, before she decided that they should garnish her father's breakfast-table. The smeared superscription offended her. "It is about those Spanish mines," she said thoughtfully; "it will be sure to excite or trouble him;" and she determined that on no account should he have his night's rest broken.

She went to bed with a sensation of impending trouble, and was haunted by dreams of the yellow seal; it was always pursuing her, and exploding like a firework. She woke in a mental fog of vague surmises. With woman's instinct she instinctively guessed the truth; as she dressed herself, she made up her mind that the days were to be evil with them:

they had always led the life of Damocles with respect to those mines ; might it not be as well that their suspense should be ended ?

She poured out the coffee lugubriously ; when her father came down, she laid the letter on his plate without a word ; there was a little joke on his lips as he opened it, but after the first few lines there was no more smiling. Such poverty had come upon him that any outcry might have been forgiven him, but such was not the doctor's way ; he read it all through without comment, and when he had finished he took off his spectacles and wiped them carefully, his hands trembling very much during the operation, and then he sat silently before them all, stroking his grey beard with a terrible sadness in his eyes.

"Is there anything the matter, father ?" asked Hester anxiously : after all, the fate of Damocles was not a pleasant one. "It is not Don Lopez's handwriting I see, but all the same I am afraid it is about those mines."

"Why, yes, you are right, Hester ;" but the doctor, as he answered her, avoided looking at his eldest daughter. "I am afraid it is a very bad piece of work after all, if I could only bring myself to believe what they tell me here ;" and then he began again fingering the grey downiness of his beard.

Barbara glanced from one to the other impatiently. Hester's tone so plainly signifying, "I told you so," irritated her, as did her father's woe-begone perplexity.

"If anything has happened, of course Daddy will tell us," she struck in, in her bold young voice, "and I don't know but what it is better to get the first plunge over ; it seems to me as though all the troubles of Job have come upon us at once,—not but what he ended very well, after all."

Dr. Heathcote shook his head with a groan. "Job's trials were not through his own fault, Barbara. When I look round on you all, I own my trouble is hard to bear ;" then they knew where the sting lay.

And after that he told them, trying to word it so that he might make it plain to their womanly intelligences : they listened to him with little thrills of astonishment and horror, Barbara especially ; but Hester, though she would feel any change in their circumstances more keenly than any one, was not disposed to lay aside that mournful glory that belongs to the true prophet : there was a certain pride in finding that her words had come true, in spite of her genuine sorrow.

"Oh, father! how I begged you to have nothing to do with those mines," she exclaimed, looking at him gloomily.

"Yes, you were right; you always are, Hester," returned the poor doctor, drooping his head; "but who could have thought that Don Lopez was a swindler?"

Barbara struck in again impetuously:

"I don't think it mends matters to bring up bygone warnings," she said, with a scornful look at Hester; "it only makes people more uncomfortable than they are. I don't believe we quite understand all Daddy has told us. How can shareholders be liable for more than they have had?"

"Your dear mother always said that she could not understand business, and I am afraid you all take after her," replied the doctor mildly. "I suppose all women are the same. No, my dear," to Barbara, "you need not fear questioning me: I will try to explain all you wish;" but it was a longer business than even he had bargained for.

"Then those shares for which you are liable are not really yours?" asked Barbara at last.

"I imagined I had sold out: I know I entrusted Don Lopez with the business. It was to be a clear profit of hundreds; and the scamp has gone and involved me deeply by buying others in my name," and he brought down his hand on the table heavily, "Does he know what he has done? The dishonourable villain, he has ruined me and my children!"

"Ruined, father?" said Barbara, turning pale at his vehemence.

"Ay, ruined? Is it not ruin when a man has to pay more than he has got? If I could clear myself and begin afresh, I think I could be happy. Old as I am, I could set to work with a will; but now——"

"Surely things cannot be quite so bad," said Hester, shrinking.

"To think that I have brought you to this poverty through my own fault!" he went on in a tone of misery, without heeding her; "and not only you, but Norman."

"Ah!" cried Barbara, with a sudden start.

"But for me," sighed Dr. Heathcote, "that poor boy would have been prosperous; and now his little all is gone. He will be keeping his word now, and leaving me; and better too, perhaps, Oh, it is hard, very hard!" and then he checked himself, saying a word or two under his breath—"that the Lord had taken

away!" Hester came a little nearer, and Connie kissed the grey head as she heard it.

"Leigh!" exclaimed Barbara, after a moment's silence, and then they all felt she had touched an old sore.

The doctor took down his hand from his eyes, and looked at her mournfully, "Yes, there is Leigh—poor Leigh, he will feel it badly now; but we must lighten it for him: as long as we have a crust, my son and my son's wife must have half."

"Are they to come this afternoon, then?" hazarded Connie in the tone of one expecting a funeral.

"Yes, of course. Why should our boy be absent from us in our trouble? he will like to see the last of the old home." Then they knew what that terrible sadness in his eyes meant.

"Father!" ejaculated Barbara; but the doctor understood her.

"Yes; it has come to that. This home will fetch us money: it may clear us. Anything is better than dishonour. Your father's debts must be paid, remember." And then he looked round upon them one by one, as though to ask their pardon.

The sisters exchanged glances of horror. "Our home—Heathcote House! no, it will kill him: it must not be." Barbara shot out her sentences breathlessly, but the doctor did not hear her.

"Yes, I brought your mother here; she was a slim thing then, like our Connie, and not much wiser, as I often told her. Dear! how the roses were out that day! It is hard to leave the house one's father's father has built;" and then again he shunned that look at his eldest-born.

"But where are we to go?" cried poor Connie, with a sob. "You talk as though we had to starve, father: people will want doctoring as much as ever."

"Yes; but, if Norman's accounts are true, they prefer Murray's doctoring to ours. There are sad gaps in the visiting-lists. It is no good crying, Connie. My children are brave women, like their dear mother; and I suppose a lodging at Durnford will hold us and Leigh too."

"A lodging at Durnford?" Barbara could not help her frightened look at Hester; and Hester's countenance conveyed a whole unuttered chapter of lamentations in return. It was almost too hard to believe, as their father had said; and then, remembering his recent trouble and feebleness, they tried to smooth their perturbed faces as they answered him.

"Oh yes, Daddy, we see what you mean," said Barbara brightly; "of course the money must be paid, whatever becomes of us; but something may be found without having to sell our home. But if we do, why, then we can try and be quite as happy in a cottage at Durnford."

"God bless my little daughter!" and then the doctor got up stiffly, feeling for his stick as he had not done for many a day.

"You are not going to leave us, dear father?" asked Hester gently, as she put it in his hand; "let one of us—let Barbara—sit with you."

"My dear," he answered, "you mean very kindly; but I would rather be alone. You see, this has come upon me suddenly; and I am not very strong: I must think what is best for you all. Send Norman to me directly he comes;" and then he nodded round at them, trying to smile as he left the room.

"Hester, it will kill him," cried Barbara, with her eyes full of tears. "If it come to this, that the house is to be sold, and we are to be cooped up in a miserable lodging at Durnford, it will bring on another illness; and that will be the end of it."

"I really believe it," answered Hester in a voice of emotion; and then the three sisters linked arms together, as they went slowly down the lawn, the very magnitude of their trouble bringing them into closer union. Barbara, as usual, was spokesman; but round Hester there still lingered that sad glory of fulfilled prophecy.

They kept each other in sight all the morning, and made all manner of womanly lamentations; but Barbara never spoke the thoughts that were galling her. When she went upstairs to prepare for dinner, she looked them in the face for a moment with a quick shudder of dread. What change would this make to her new hopes, her two days' old treasure? Norman was poor now, as well as they; would poverty alter him? Could he, would he, be ever able to marry now; or would he go away, as he threatened, and leave them pinching and slaving in a miserable lodging in Durnford, exposed to the gossips and pity of the Misses MacArthur and others of the same clique? How would life feel without him and Mrs. Strath? At this point of her soliloquy she saw such a scared face in the glass, and such blank misty eyes, that she started and pinched herself for selfishness, and came downstairs wondering what special sin had been

theirs that such troubles had come upon them ; and through the silent dinner, while Connie sat opposite, very red-eyed and with a large appetite, which she humoured secretly, she wondered to herself whether she might be the domestic Jonah, and how soon it might accord with prudence to throw her out of the home-vessel.

She woke up when her father asked her to read to him. He looked jaded and inexpressibly weary ; but there was a calmness, too, which he had lacked in the morning, as though he had found strength when he most needed it. Norman had not been near him, she found, to his increased uneasiness ; and now he desired his daughters that all telling of Leigh should be reserved for himself.

Barbara read aloud most of the afternoon ; afterwards they owned that neither understood the story in the least, but the effort soothed them ; Leigh, entering, thought it was a very pretty family group he was disturbing.

"You have made it late, my boy," said his father. "Is your wife there ? She must excuse my rising ; I am rather feeble to-day. Barbara, give your chair to Leigh's wife. Thank you for all your reading, my dear : a pretty book, but rather vague, don't you think so ? Connie, take the cloak from Ruth : she looks tired."

"No, not tired," faltered Ruth timidly. Leigh interrupted her.

"Hillo, Con. ! how long have you had pink eyes. Is that all for Sydney's going ?—fortunate youth !"

"Oh, hush !" cried Connie, with a sound between a giggle and a sob. Barbara put her hands to her ears with a sense of jar and discord.

"Whew ! Barbara looks as lachrymose as possible too ; what is the matter with the girls, father, they have made you as tired as themselves ?"

"I think we are all tired, Leigh," replied Dr. Heathcote, with his sad smile. "I meant this to have been a happier coming-home for you, and you too, my dear," with a little old-fashioned bow to his daughter-in-law ; "but we have had bad news this morning. Don't look at your sisters, poor things ; they'll have enough to bear. It is all wrong with the Spanish mines, my son ; Norman and I are the dupes of a mock company."

Leigh almost started from his chair ; but at a sign from Barbara he restrained himself. A few forcible words from his

father made him comprehend the state of affairs. Bab saw he grasped the sense of ruin in a moment ; he looked almost sullen with grief as Dr. Heathcote spoke of the necessity of selling their house.

"And because there are not enough for you to work for, I have brought you another mouth to feed," he said, with a rueful glance at his wife. "It seems as though committing one fault is like sowing the ground with dragon's teeth, such consequences crop up on all sides."

"Never mind if they crop up ready to do battle for us," cried Bab, with an attempt at humour ; "you must try and be brave, for father's sake, Leigh."

"Yes, we must strengthen each other's hands, my boy ; remember, we have each something to forgive. I ought to have known better than to have put my family in such peril," he sighed heavily, and went on : "We must not distress your sisters or Ruth more than we can help. Take Leigh's wife to her room, my dear ; Leigh and I will talk it over a little by ourselves."

They rose obediently, and he held out his hand to Ruth for a moment.

"You must not vex yourself, or look quite so sad about it, Ruth," he said kindly ; "the worst is, that you have married into a very poor family, and will have to rough it a little, like the rest of us."

"As if I should mind that," cried Ruth, with her face kindling ; then plaintively : "Ah, if you would only let me work, I should be so happy, and a trouble to no one."

"You must not say that, my dear ; we should not like Leigh's wife to work, should we, Hester ? No, no ; you are one of my daughters now, and I must take care of you ;" and then he patted her hand, and let her go.

Hester showed her her pleasant rooms with mournful courtesy. "These are yours as long as we are here," she said, as she pointed out the different accessories for comfort. "If I had had a little longer time, I could have made them look better."

"I am sure they are beautiful," returned Ruth, trying to look grateful, but in reality unable to see anything for the fast-rising tears. "You must not think me indifferent or cold," she went on, struggling for composure ; "but if you knew what I feel when I hear him so compassionate, and know what a burden we shall be ! and he so old, and you will not let me work, any of you."

"Perhaps we may all have to work, Ruth," said Hester kindly, touched at this real repentance. "I don't mean to say that we are not very sorrowful; but I think we must be brave too."

"Ah, you are good—you have nothing with which to reproach yourself: you have not that sense of wrong-doing that makes the heart heavy."

"No, neither have you," returned Barbara quickly. "Nonsense! forgiveness is not an idle word;" then in a lower tone: "Don't stain the blankness of the page; it is all white and fresh now."

Ruth held up her head comforted; and then they all sat and talked together till it was time to go downstairs.

Ruth had been a little consoled, and her calmness was restful. Not so with Leigh; he was not capable of hiding his feelings, and his face of profound wretchedness was a sore trial to his father and to them all; it was felt as a sensible relief by more than one, when Connie announced suddenly that Norman was in the surgery, and would be with her father directly.

Barbara shrank back into her dark corner at the far end of the room as he entered; she was glad that he could not see her face; and then she trembled all over, for fear he should pass her by. He was shaking hands with them all—yes—no—he had his back to her—he was gone. A little sound like a sigh came from Barbara, when all at once a cold loose grasp fastened on her hand for a moment, and then he sat down by Dr. Heathcote.

She could not hear what her father said, or how he answered him, they had dropped their voices so low. Ruth came out of the circle, and Leigh took her place; by and by she went out on the terrace, and Hester and Connie joined her; they paced up and down before the dark windows, talking softly; no one noticed Barbara, hidden away in the corner. Dr. Heathcote raised his voice a little. "They think I am not here," thought Bab; and though it was bliss to her, poor child, to feel she was in the same room with him, she was far too honourable to enjoy her stolen sweets; she would not join the others,—she was in too highly wrought a mood for their talk,—so she took up her station at the hall window, where she had sat on the evening of Nigel's accident, and felt herself a heroine.

The servant passed and repassed; the hall-lamp was lighted, the chilly moonbeams came and wrapped her round; she could hear Ruth going up to her own room, and Connie's sleepy good-

night ; but still she sat in the shadow of the old clock, looking out on the dark flower-beds, and waiting till he should come. She could not sleep till she had spoken to him—the remembrance of the loose cold grasp oppressed her ; she would forget, for this night at least, her new hopes, and what he was to her, and think only that he was Bab's friend, and that she was sorry for him. He came out at last, opening the door in his old abrupt fashion, Leigh following him ; she shrank back behind the clock again,—she could not speak before Leigh. Hush ! some one was calling him—his father—no, Hester ; he must go now. “ Good-night, Norman ; I recommend you to sleep on it,” he called out, as he went back into the room ; and then, without waiting for her fresh timidity to return, she came out of her hiding-place straight towards him.

He was standing under the hall-lamp, drawing on his gloves with the air of a man who does not know what he is doing, his eyes bent to the ground, and a heavy frown on his brow ; he did not even look up as she drew near—not till she timidly accosted him.

“ Norman ! ” then how he started.

“ You here, Barbara ! How is it you are not in bed ?—all the others are ; what nonsense ! and twelve o'clock, too.” His voice was gruff, his manner almost ill-pleased, and something stern in his countenance made her heart sink ; did he think her forward ? was he angry with her ? “ Norman always looks cross when he is ill or unhappy,” she said, to reassure herself ; but her courage was oozing away for all that.

Dr. Strath was not a prepossessing man at all times ; there were some people who denied that he ever could be, but these were mostly his detractors. There was a wholesome strength and ruggedness about him that others rather admired ; but it was certain that in some moods of mind, like the present, for example, he could look positively ugly ; on such occasions there was a harshness and severity of exterior that would grate on you ; the eyes, generally so kind and wise, had a fierce trick with them, and the mouth would smile sardonically in the midst of his beard, which at such times was always in an uncouth state of roughness ; no wonder Barbara's courage failed as she looked at him.

“ It is such folly, people injuring their health in that way,” he went on, pulling at his glove so quickly that it rent across his palm, at which piece of awkwardness he stamped his foot in an impatient manner.

"Give me the glove; I will mend it for you," said Bab gently, taking it from him. "You are always spoiling your gloves, Norman. I did not know it was so late; I was only waiting for a little while to say good-night to you," she continued, with a quick blush at what her words implied.

"Good-night," he returned ungraciously, not seeing the blush; and he was positively turning from her, but she called him back.

"Oh, Norman, do let me say a word to you. I am so sorry, so sorry about all this trouble;" and her face was full of the sweetness of sympathy, as she held out her hand to him.

"Sorry—yes, we are all sorry, I suppose; but there's no use in crying over spilt milk, as I can see. We're all in the same boat, as it happens, too; and there's no knowing who will sink and swim among us all. I don't feel like swimming much, myself," he continued, with a harsh laugh; he had taken her hand, and was holding it without any pressure, and now she withdrew it in a hurt sort of way.

"Yes, we are all in the same boat," she returned gravely; "but that makes it harder to bear, being so sorry for each other. It is not very pleasant to think, Norman, that we are the cause of your trouble," and her eyes brimmed over with unfallen tears.

"Tush, nonsense! what folly! It is all my own fault in allowing myself to be so gulled; there's the doctor asking my forgiveness, and all that sort of thing. Go to bed, and get this trash out of your head;" he still spoke roughly, but there was a gleam of kindness in his tone, as though he were scolding a refractory child.

"Very well," she returned submissively, but with a face that went to his heart; "I only wanted to know how your mother was."

"I have scarcely seen her. How should she be? Just put everybody out of your head, and go to sleep. I shall be here early in the morning: there—good-night;" but this time Barbara's hand was not ready for him.

"Good-night," she answered very sadly, and choking back her tears; and then he went. How was she to know that his heart was so heavy with sorrow, that he could have groaned aloud? she could only think how changed he was, how cold, how unlike himself. "I suppose it is because I do not understand men, not even Norman when he is in one of his moods. But I don't think I ever saw him quite like this before; can the loss

of a little money have so hardened him? I think, in spite of his ridiculing the notion, he must be angry with us; or why should he speak so coldly of our being in the same boat, without one word of sympathy? Oh, if Norman changes to us," sighed Bab wearily, "I think it will be more than I can bear. I could almost believe to-night that it was all my fancy, and that he does not love me at all; suppose he does not, suppose he goes away and leaves me: people don't die of broken hearts nowadays—I know I'm not of the right stuff for it, anyhow; but oh dear! oh dear!" and all the dreary conjecturing went on till Bab forgot her troubles in sleep, or lived them over again in her dreams.

She came down late the next morning, and the first thing she heard was, that her father was with Norman in the surgery. On coming in from a ramble in the garden a little later, she was told that the horses had been ordered, and that they had ridden off together. Norman had sent word to Hester that he would take great care of Dr. Heathcote, and that they would probably not be home to lunch, but that he would have refreshment at one of the farmhouses: which message set Hester's mind quite at rest. It was indeed time that Dr. Heathcote should show himself to his patients, but not the less did she dread the long rides for him till he was stronger. Connie, who had been paying one of her peeping visits to the surgery, now volunteered the information that something unusual must be going on: not only the day ledger, but all the big books had been taken down; there were rough estimates of accounts in Norman's handwriting, Norman looked as surly as a bear: perhaps they had dissolved partnership; for which unguarded remark Barbara could have boxed her ears.

Barbara was in one of her fretful humours, and could settle to nothing; she would not join the others in the Harlequin room, where Hester was teaching Ruth lace-work; they were growing so confidential over it, that they would only have provoked her jealousy. If she could have sought her beloved pine-woods it would have been better, but she would only have been made miserable by her dread of meeting Nigel; the idea of resuming her painting without him was simply odious; to-day more than ever she felt how she would miss him and his ready sympathy. There was nothing for it but to betake herself again to the garden, and sit and fan herself with her broad-brimmed hat under her favourite elm-tree and snub Ben, and think what a wretched thing existence was after all. It was rather a de-

teriorating occupation, and only served to depress her more. It was rather a relief when advancing shadows made her conscious of human proximity; it would be quite a pleasure to speak crossly to somebody: to whet the tongue sometimes makes the heart less sore, thought Bab; if it could only be Connie! She raised her eyes, and then she would have given anything to be in the drawing-room safe under Hester's wings—in the pine-woods anywhere; for could it be? yes, it was St. Ronans himself walking quietly up the shady side of the lawn. She watched him, quite fascinated; she almost felt unable to move in her surprise. Yes, there was the slouching felt hat, and the velvet coat he would persist in wearing; she could almost see the loose fall of his collar, with the blue knotted handkerchief. She was afraid, yes, she was afraid he limped more; and the little cane in his hand was new to her. No, there was no escaping—he saw her now. What a goose she had been not to slip behind the summer-house, and so into the shrubberies! it would have been ignoble, but safe. How were they to meet after that awkward scene? Oh, it was too bad of him to follow her like this; and her face glowed hotly at the remembrance of his last words. "How handsome, how well he looks!" she said to herself before she shyly cast down her eyes. It was no good; she felt she never had any dignity. She must stand up there like a bashful schoolgirl with only one idea uppermost, and that to get away from him as soon as possible. She only wished she could control that rebellious blush of hers—it might mislead him; and oh, if she could only not stammer!

But nothing could exceed the easiness of Nigel's greeting: it was as impossible for him to be awkward as it was for Barbara to look dignified; the sensation was unknown to him. He wore his unlucky character of rejected suitor as gracefully as he would have worn his accepted honours. There was nothing to distress Barbara in his frank greeting, though he threw her one of his keen looks at first.

"How delightful it is out here! I never loved anything so much as this old garden; to my mind it beats the fir-plantation hollow; these trees have the growth of years. Hester told me where I might find you; she looks harassed, poor girl, and no wonder;" here he sighed. "May I sit down on this step beside you, Barbara, or shall I dispose of myself lower on the turf?"

"Whichever you like," returned Barbara stiffly, his perfect

case making her feel angry with herself and him : if this were the way he could meet her after what had passed between them, the sooner she brought it to his recollection the better ; " whichever you like," she repeated in her cool fashion : " for myself, I was just going in." Then his voice changed.

" Going in ! nonsense, Barbara ; do you know I have come all this way to speak to you ? "

" We can speak quite as well indoors," she replied, hurriedly leading the way thither. " I have left Ruth too long alone as it is—it is her first day here ; and poor Hester must be tired. You will find your sofa in its old place, St. Ronans, if you would like a rest after your walk."

She was taking him then into the thick of them ; she thought the presence of her sisters would be a check on him. She had reckoned without her host : he was getting vexed now ; but nothing could exceed the smoothness of his words.

" Hester and Mrs. Leigh are there, I suppose you know, Barbara ? "

" Yes, of course ; they will be very glad to see you, St. Ronans," she returned, forcing him with his tired limb painfully to keep up with her ; but just then prudence was prevailing over pity.

" Oh, very well, I thought you did not know : of course, if you do not mind, it is nothing to me. I shall say what I've come to say, if it were in the presence of a hundred witnesses : you know me well enough to be sure of that, Barbara."

Was he threatening her ? She faced round upon him perfectly scarlet.

" You'll say what you've come to say ; what do you mean by that, St. Ronans ? " but her heart misgave her as she put the question.

" There, I thought you would be reasonable : it would not be very pleasant for you to hear, or me to tell, this sort of thing before Hester. Dr. Heathcote might be different ; but until you let me speak to him, I think we had better keep our little affairs to ourselves. A man does not like to be reminded before witnesses that he has been refused," he continued, a little sadly, " and I think you are far too generous to wish any such telling."

" Of course I have kept my own counsel," she returned proudly ; she was standing still when she had put that question to him, and now she was still pausing in irresolution.

" It is not because you have said me nay, that we should

cease to be friends," he said, watching her; "I don't think you need fear trusting yourself to St. Ronans."

"Not to St. Ronans," she replied, with meaning emphasis.

"Well, it shall be as you wish. Look here, Barbara, I'll never worry you to call me Nigel again;" then as she started joyfully, as though attaching more meaning to his words than he intended, "I don't say that I shall ever give up loving you, or wishing you to be what I asked you,—that would be impossible; but just now I want you to forget that I am anything but Bab's master, your old friend St. Ronans, who has come to hear all about this sad trouble that has befallen you."

His frank kindness touched her to the heart; he had not intended it, but it was misleading her. "How generous, how self-forgetful, how truly noble he is!" she said to herself, as she suffered him to retrace their steps; and then the thought of Norman's coldness crossed her.

"Bab has missed her master," she said, in a softer tone than she ought to have used, though she spoke in the innocence of her gratitude.

"It is only two days; has it seemed so long?" returned Nigel, in surprise; but his manner was joyful, and Barbara felt she had been indiscreet.

She resolved to be more guarded—rather a difficult task with simple Barbara; but the pleasure of telling her sad tale and all her fears, the refreshment of his warm sympathy, and the delight of feeling she might keep him as a friend, all contrived to throw her off her balance. Never very good at concealment, Barbara soon betrayed to Nigel's watchfulness how much honest affection was lavished on him; he had no idea that she had really cared for him so much; it was not the right kind, and she had refused him very decidedly, and almost with gestures of horror; but Barbara was like no other girl; might it not be that she was loath to entertain these ideas at all? She had always seemed singularly untamed in these things, and rather savage in her simplicity; perhaps the thought of a lover displeased her,—it was new and repellent, she did not know her own mind; the doubt charmed him; his eyes brightened with fresh life as he listened to her. It was such wonderful happiness to be hearing her voice again, that he could not bring himself to interrupt her, even by a word, until she mentioned the lodgings at Durnford, and then he started up with a gesture of annoyance.

"What, sell your house and take lodgings at Durnford!"

nonsense, Barbara ; are you dreaming or mad ? The idea is preposterous ; why Leigh would be ready to cut his throat with *ennui* before a month was gone."

"I know it will be very bad for him," she answered sadly ; "he is so restless."

"Restless, I should think so ; who proposed this Utopian scheme for the happy family ? Leigh would feel himself in a cage, and commence gnawing his bars through at once ; come, Barbara, you are too sensible to entertain such a notion seriously ; why he would be quarrelling with you all, and be tired of his own wife, before you had been many weeks together ; if you have any wish for your father's or Leigh's happiness, or even for your own, you will do your best to prevent such an arrangement."

"I—what have I to do with it ?" faltered poor Barbara ; "if you only heard the miserable way in which Daddy will talk of sharing his crust with his son and his son's wife ! I don't like the idea of a crust, St. Ronans."

"Things can't be quite so bad as all that," returned Nigel, incredulously.

"Oh, but they are," she assured him ; and thereupon followed the dismal schedule of debts, that she had gleaned from her father's lips. "I don't know but what a lodging in Durnford and a butterless crust may be very dreary, but any debt or dishonour would be worse."

"Far worse," assented Nigel ; and then he dropped his head on his hand again and remained silent. Barbara subsided into dreariness.

The silence was growing irksome, when, turning her head, she found that he was watching her with one of his keen looks.

"Don't you think it is time we go in ?" she suggested, rather hastily.

"Nearly time ; but don't move just yet, Barbara. I would rather not say what I am going to say before Hester ;" then she settled herself, dumbly, feeling that he was too much for her.

"I don't want to offend you again," he said, somewhat hesitatingly. "Sometimes I think I was too hasty with you last time, and frightened you with my roughness ; was it so, Barbara ?" waiting for her to speak, but Barbara would not answer.

"I took you by surprise," he went on ; "sometimes I think it was not quite manly of me, but you know my hot temper.

I ought to have given you time to think over what I was saying ; I will never be so hasty again with you, Barbara." He drew a little nearer to her as he spoke, and went on earnestly : "I cannot take back what I said then. I want you to consider it quietly at your leisure : think what it is to be the dearest in all the world to such a man as I. I cannot tell how it has happened, but you are beautiful in my eyes."

"St. Ronans, if you talk like this, I shall go in to Hester."

"You would not be safe even under her wing, little bird. Ah ! I have you there : now you must listen to me. Don't look so frightened, Barbara, see how gentle I am ; it is St. Ronans who is talking to you all this time, remember."

"You know you have me in your power," she returned angrily ; she was wounded at his persistent persecution, fearful of what he might say next ; he was making her cowardly with that strong will of his. "I shall know how to trust myself again with you, St. Ronans," she finished, with an attempt at dignity.

Nigel put down the attempt with quiet ease. "Do not distress yourself," he returned soothingly ; "I will say what I have come to say, and then you shall go free. I knew pretty well the position of affairs before you began to talk, only I hardly thought they were quite so bad. Look here, Barbara, you refused me, I know ; you are not likely even now to marry me for your own sake, or mine either, though any other woman must be won by such devotion, but at least I can ask you to marry me for your father's sake."

Then she hid her face, that he might not see its sudden paleness. "And not only for his sake, but for Leigh's," he went on, now speaking very low ; "have you ever thought what I can offer you ? You did not think it worth your acceptance then ; think over it well before you push away the only hand that can help you and yours in your trouble."

"If I am to help them by telling a lie," she said, lifting her head proudly, "I would rather they starved ;" but the mild reproach of his look disarmed her.

"Am I asking you to tell a lie ? Do you dare to avow in all honesty that you have no sort of affection for me—none ?"

Then in her truth she answered him :

"I will never say what is untrue. I do love you, and very dearly, too, St. Ronans. A girl might give her brother what I give you, but it will never be a different sort of love—never."

"You think so now," he answered quietly. "You are mistaken, Barbara; many a girl has married, feeling no more fondness for her future husband than you feel for me. What if I am content to receive what you can give me?"

She shook her head in mournful denial.

"But I am. Listen to me, Barbara. Only three words, 'I am yours, Nigel,' and every debt from these miserable shares shall be paid, and Heathcote House yours for ever. Don't look at me like that. Ah! if you loved your father, if you had but one spark of the generosity that I thought was in your character, you would be ready to do more than this, rather than see him go forth to his death."

"St. Ronans, you shall not make me suffer like this—cruel, cruel!" and Barbara broke out into a perfect passion of tears; but he saw softening in them, and would not spare her.

"I am only telling you the truth. Ask any one—ask Norman, if the break-up of the home which he has lived in all his life will not kill him: another stroke, at least, must be the result of such agitation. Oh, Barbara! I never thought that the doctor's little daughter could so harden her heart against her father; how often I have heard you speak of Jephtha's daughter as your favourite heroine, and scoff at the idea of love without sacrifice."

He was pricking her to the quick; in her terror at his words, her very resolution seemed wavering. He was using his power ungenerously, but that it was power was certain; if she could only have checked her tears to answer him, but she could not. It was in her heart to tell him about Norman, but the name would not have got itself said.

"I wish I could spare you this suffering," he went on, "but I cannot; it is life and death to me—remember that. But if you cannot do it for your father's sake, do it at least for Leigh; think twice before you doom him to such an existence when a word would save him."

"I will not speak the word," she sobbed out passionately.

"No, you will not; you are strengthening yourself in your selfishness, I see that clearly. Barbara, you are disappointing me: I thought you so noble that you would almost have laid down your life for your brother's sake."

"You would have me do evil that good may come; you are a merciless tempter, St. Ronans."

"There can be nothing evil in blessing three lives, Barbara. Women make these sort of sacrifices every day, and with less

truth than you. Remember Leigh's whole future hangs on your decision : your father is old, and a few years of more or less comfort may not matter to him ; but think of Leigh's youth, of all his brightness worn away by drudgery. Only speak the word, Barbara, and a partnership in a merchant's house shall be offered to him, and, before many years are out, he will be on his way to honest wealth and independence."

She had heard him out, but the misery on her face might have touched a heart of stone ; it struck Nigel even with remorse.

"Forgive me, Barbara," he said, taking her listless hand. "I know I have pained you ; but I could not see you throw away all these chances of happiness for the want of a little thought. Think over what I have said : this day week I will come to you for your answer ;" then he rose from the grass, and took up his hat from beside her.

"Good-bye," he said, still lingering. "Will you not tell me you forgive me this apparent cruelty ?"

"No, I cannot bring myself to say that. I thought you more generous, St. Ronans. Oh dear ! oh dear !" A fresh burst of tears impeded her utterance ; and when she could check them sufficiently to look up, he was no longer beside her : she could see him slowly threading the winding shrubberies. Gone ! when she meant to tell him what was in her heart, and why she could never give him a different answer. "Oh, it is very hard," cried poor Barbara. "Why did he—why did he—tell me that ? How am I ever to be happy now, whichever way it is ? And perhaps after all Norman does not care for me—he was so cold, so unkind, yesterday. I am getting afraid of St. Ronans, too ; he will make me do things against my will ; he takes no refusal. Oh, Daddy, Daddy, what shall I do ? Was there ever such a miserable creature in existence as your poor Bab !"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CLOUDS DEEPEN.

“ Oh, for comfort ! Oh, the waste of a long doubt and trouble !
On that sultry August eve trouble had made me meek ;
I was tired of my sorrow. Oh, so faint, for it was double
In the weight of its oppression, that I could not speak.”

JEAN INGELOW.

THE next two or three days were days of wretchedness to Barbara : do what she would, she could not get Nigel's words out of her head ; if he had wished to punish her for her obstinacy to his suit, he could not have found out a way to render her more truly miserable. The strongest part of Bab's nature was her love for her father and brother, and Nigel had not over-estimated her generosity in supposing her capable of any sacrifice for their sakes ; nothing but that obstinate truthfulness of hers, and those few poor words of Norman's, prevented her from yielding to his temptation ; but as yet she never hesitated. “ I will be faithful to him, as long as he wants me,” she said, pressing her little hands together convulsively ; “ until I know from his own lips that he does not care for me, and never means to be anything but Bab's friend, I will not listen to St. Ronans. Ruth has done wrong, and Hester, and I blamed them both, and rightly too ; but sometimes I think I shall have a harder fight than either of them,” in saying which Barbara unconsciously spoke the truth.

She held herself much aloof from the home circle at this sad time, which brought down on her many a rebuke from Hester, but the rebukes were milder and more wholesome than they used to be. Barbara would hear them out silently, and then go and sit by her father ; she still did her duty to him very sweetly, but there was a heaviness in her whole aspect that made his heart ache ; she had the air of one who did not quite know what she was about—an absent, lost sort of manner. Her hair rippled quite fiercely over her forehead just now ; her great eyes seemed to challenge every one that approached her. “ Dame Muffet is in one of her black fits,” Leigh observed slyly ; but Bab only shrugged her shoulders at him, for, in sorrow and out of sorrow, Bab was ever tricky.

One afternoon, about three days after her last interview

with Nigel, she went down to Oakleigh Cottage ; she had been shunning Mrs. Strath of late, with a curious consciousness that she could never be at her old ease with her, but her anxiety to hear about Norman put this feeling aside ; she had never seen him once since the night he had been so brusque with her ; she could not get it out of her mind that perhaps he was avoiding her. Hester had had long talks with him in the surgery, and Connie too. Barbara had never ventured on such debatable ground, but she could not keep away from the cottage any longer.

Her friend received her with open arms ; if she wondered what had become of her, she did not say so ; her kindness was humiliating, so much was she disposed to kill the fatted calf for the truant ; she took off her hat with her own hands ; Barbara had to submit to be kissed and made a fuss over, while the gentle hands coaxed and managed the rebellious hair.

"You may as well leave it alone, Mrs. Strath ; it will persist in standing all on end, and going just the wrong way. I think it sympathises with me," sighed poor Bab ; and then Mrs. Strath looked kindly at her, telling her that she was getting pale and thin ; and then taking the girl's hand, led her into her pleasant shady room, and made her sit down in her old place.

"Nest was here just now ; she is almost as much a stranger as you are, Barbara, Sir Geoffrey takes up so much of her time now. I don't have as much of my adopted daughters as I used to have ;" she finished with one of her fond smiles. Barbara did not say much in answer, her heart was too sore ; she was in the place where she most loved to be, but it might have been the stool of repentance for all the comfort it yielded her : it fretted her to see Mrs. Strath's jaded look ; her questioning, gentle as it was, harassed her into abruptness, and even her sympathy failed utterly.

By and by she began to question in her turn, and then she almost wished she had held her tongue, in her dismay at what Mrs. Strath had to tell her. Mrs. Strath cried a good deal over her narration, with the quiet subdued tears of age, and was very pitiful over herself and Barbara, breaking off with tender little exclamations and embraces, with all of which Barbara could have dispensed in her fretted excitement.

Yes, it was all settled ; did not Barbara know that ? She was getting too old now to begin life afresh, and such a life ; it was banishment, exile ! Was it likely that she would ever see England and Sunningford again ? The tears furrowed her

cheeks at this juncture ; Barbara kissed them away, rather impatiently, it is true, and begged her to go on ; the poor child was heart-sick with suspense.

Well, the partnership was dissolved by mutual consent, she continued. Norman had talked Dr. Heathcote into it ; he had been taking him round to his patients, and he had gleaned such facts during his visits, had heard such dissatisfaction expressed, and seen such open dislike of Norman, that he owed it to his own family to accede to his request. Curiously enough, the partnership deeds had never been completed, owing to the sudden death of Dr. Heathcote's solicitor ; they were to be signed that very day when the doctor was taken ill : so there was no difficulty. Norman owned that he had never liked the place or the people ; their ignorance galled him, and he had no heart to put up with their ingratitude. The doctor was strong enough now to resume his own practice—that was, as much of it as Murray left him : he was so depressed and broken that a little opposition might do him good. Norman had settled everything with Mr. Lisle. Mr. Lisle was to find the necessary money, she did not know how ; and he was only waiting till a good assistant should be found ; but as he had heard of one to-day likely to suit, she was afraid that the reprieve would be a short one.

Barbara sat as quiet as she could ; but every trace of colour left her face, until Nigel Strath's name was mentioned, and then she flushed up, rather to her friend's surprise. "Nigel had been to Oakleigh Cottage yesterday, looking as ill as possible, but full of generous projects for Norman ; he wanted to lend him money, buy him a London practice, or do anything that one cousin might do for another, but Norman had refused everything ; he had been positively ungracious to Nigel, bearing himself as though injured by his munificent offers, he would hardly listen to him ; Nigel had gone away quite hurt. It was evident, though Mrs. Strath forbore from open blame, that she was secretly chagrined at her son's conduct ; as usual, he had not treated her to a thorough confidence ; she thought him inconsiderate in his arrangements for her ; two or three times she let drop that she could not understand him at all.

"It is a long voyage to take by myself, my dear," she said plaintively, "but Norman will not hear of my accompanying him ; he is in a terrible hurry, to be sure. They both say I must not come until they have a house ready to receive me ; but I don't like to think of Norman roughing it without me, and no one to darn his socks, and no money to buy new ones ;

and then there are his collars, and his dinners, and the airing of his bed: he has always had his mother to see after these things;” and at this confession of her trouble, the poor woman sighed heavily.

Something more than socks and collars was in Barbara's mind at this minute—honest anger, a sense of unmerited ill-treatment, and above all a terrible feeling that she had been mistaken in Norman; he was harder than she thought him. This did not look like love; what a miserable fool she had been! After all, Nigel was more generous: the man who loved her was weighing heavier in the balance than the man whom she loved; a little more, and she would be fighting against her own truth, as though it were her enemy. Jeannie came in to lay the table, at which the two women started apart as though they had been discovered in a crime, and Mrs. Strath smoothed her face and spoke pleasantly to her little handmaiden; but she was still on the subject of the fatted calf, and brought forth the remnants of the seed-cake with melancholy gusto. Barbara was in no mood for the cosy tea-table, but her denials were overruled. “Do stay, my dear, just to please me,” said her friend persuasively. “Norman will not come in, and we shall have it all to ourselves; who knows how many more afternoons we may have together? Bring in the brown Windsor pears and the apricot jam, Jeannie; and put Miss Barbara's chair to the table.”

“Norman will not come in,” was a stronger argument than the brown Windsor pears, and Barbara yielded at once with just sufficient reluctance to enhance Mrs. Strath's victory; her heart was very soft over the girl's wilfulness and silence; nevertheless Barbara felt herself injured, when five minutes afterwards Norman entered, and though his mother's surprise at seeing him was genuine, she chose to consider herself caught in a trap.

He gave an involuntary exclamation when he saw Barbara, though he tried to suppress it: Oakleigh Cottage was the last place where he expected to see her just now. Barbara chose to ignore the exclamation; but, under her sulkiness, her heart was thumping wildly.

He sat down opposite to her, and looked at her wistfully; the paleness, the big eyes gleaming out of the forest of ripples, the wayward and sorrowful curves of the mouth, smote him to the heart with a fresh pain. “Had she suffered as well as the rest of them?” He hoped not; but yet mute evidences of such suffering were there, kept in check, as usual, by a fretful humour;

he had to subject her, it might be, to a fresh trial ; it would be better for her, and for him, too, that he should speak to her and get it over ; he must tell her, once for all, that he should never marry, and then any feeling she had for him would be nipped in the bud ; he should see better, when he spoke to her, whether there were any such feeling. He sat casting kindly sad glances at her ; his mother saw them, and was comforted ; it would all come right with them now, she thought. There was very little conversation between the three.

"Have you mended my glove, Barbara?" he asked, with an attempt of his old light manner. "It was an odd idea of mine putting them on at twelve o'clock at night, was it not? and they were new ones, too ; how long had you been hiding behind that clock-case?" but Barbara would have nothing to do with such mournful rallying.

"Yes ; I have finished your glove," she returned, very gravely. "Did not Hester give it you? Mrs. Strath, if we have finished tea, I will go home." She was choking with anger and sorrow over every morsel she took, and he was trying to rally her.

"If you are going home," returned Dr. Strath, "I think I will walk with you ; it is early yet, Barbara—hardly six, I believe ;" then his mother interposed, with urgent pleas that she should stay ; but this time Barbara's resolution was not to be shaken. She did not want Norman to walk with her ; but he might do so, if he liked. He was going to tell her that he was leaving Sunningford ; very well, she would betray no feeling, if she could help it ; if such hardness could be his, she would be very careful not to humiliate herself in his eyes ; some word she would speak of indignation at his so acting, and that would be all : an evil pride was creeping on her, giving her a false support in her trouble.

"I am glad Norman is going with you," said Mrs. Strath, kissing her.

"He can do as he likes," returned Barbara, with one of her wilful looks. Dr. Strath was holding open the gate for her to pass, but, with a curious revulsion of feeling, she lingered a moment to pick a late-blooming rose—one of Norman's favourites ; before her walk was over she had pulled it to pieces in her restless hands.

He turned round abruptly on her, the moment they were in the road.

"Barbara, have you and my mother been talking?"

"Talking! Well, I suppose so," replied Barbara, with an odd laugh; but Norman did not join in it.

"And she has told you about my going away?"

She signified her assent.

"It seems sudden, does it not? But I have been thinking over it a long time; circumstances have decided me. I cannot stay on here, now they have taken the bread out of my mouth."

Barbara remained silent; he should draw no look or word from her, that should oppose his going; of that she was determined.

"Perhaps I might have borne even that," he went on, "if they had not taken it out of my mother's mouth too; then it was not possible to stand quietly by and endure seeing it."

"Yes, it is very hard for you; no wonder you are angry with us," she agreed, wilfully misconstruing his meaning; but he interrupted her in some surprise.

"Nonsense! what are you talking about, Barbara? Why should that make me angry with you, of all people?"

"Why, of course it is all Daddy's fault," she answered simply; "he was very wrong about those mines." Then he bade her very sharply hold her peace, but his look belied the roughness of his words.

"You ought not to refer to this again, when I bade you not," he said, somewhat more gently. "Women wage such mischief with their tongues. You know I alluded to Murray and the Durnford doings, when I spoke of the bread being taken out of my mouth. It is only fair to your father, and to you all, that I should leave him unhampered by my presence. I verily believe that, as things are going on now, they would ruin him if I were to remain; some of them hate me like poison."

"I should not wonder," returned Barbara quietly; at which answer he flushed up angrily.

"I don't know what I have done but good to them," he exclaimed, in some bitterness. "Are you going to turn against me, too, Barbara?"

"No; you are too good for them," she said, with a quick impulse of pity, as she thought of his wasted life.

"Then you think I am right in making my way elsewhere? You think I am right, Barbara?" he repeated, as Barbara maintained a steady silence.

"No," was the cold, uncompromising answer; "I think you are wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yes, quite wrong. Why do you ask me, Norman? you do not care for my opinion—I don't think you ever did. Bab is no longer the little friend to you that she used to be."

"Not my friend, Barbara?"

"No; friends are treated with confidence. Why did you not tell me that you were going away, Norman? Why did you leave me to guess it by accident; that is being as a stranger, not a friend."

"I am telling you now," he returned quickly.

"Yes, you are telling me now—now, when I must hear it. I suppose you thought that I should not approve of your plans?"

"It is sufficient that my conscience approves," he replied, somewhat haughtily.

"Ah! your conscience. I wonder if you will care to hear how you have disappointed me," she went on, in a sad voice that thrilled him. "I thought you were one of a thousand, Norman. I should have said that you were the very last to shirk difficulties, to turn your back on your enemies because you were too cowardly to face them."

"You are judging me charitably, Barbara."

"No, I never was charitable, but I must speak the truth. Why are you going away, but because you have no patience to stay and suffer? The fight is a degrading one, I know; it is all against poor ignorant people. You are angry with them, Norman, and they do not know any better. If I were you, I would rather starve than go away, leaving such a slur upon my name."

"You forget my mother," he said, moved by her arguments.

"No, I do not forget her. She would rather have the humblest lodging in Durnford than follow you to that great strange city: it is cruel to her at her age, and you should not ask it."

"She can remain in England," he replied briefly.

"What! remain without you? Pray do not wound her by hinting at such a thing. No, you know your own mind best," she went on, with a return of the old proud manner: "I ought not to have said all this."

"No, I do not think you ought, Barbara; you are only making it harder for me—when I am doing it for all your sakes, too."

"If you are doing it for our sakes," she said very softly, and looking up at him, "had you not better reconsider it?"

We don't like to part with you, Norman, that is the truth. Daddy is getting old and unfit for work, and there is no dependence on Leigh. When this absurd prejudice has worn off, you might be everything to him : we are sure he will fret when you are gone."

"If I really thought I could help you by remaining," he said in such a hesitating voice that she thought he had wavered; "but no, I should only work mischief. I have thought it all over, night and day : the greatest kindness I can do for you is to go."

"But, Norman !"

"Hush ! child, hush ! you do not know, you cannot judge ; how can a girl like you put yourself in my place ? I tell you, I am doing my duty, and that my conscience upholds me ; do not make it too hard for me to follow its dictates."

"I am not going to say any more," she returned sullenly, and then it was that she commenced pulling her rose to pieces ; what were Norman's roses to her now, when he was going away ? They had passed the green door in the wall a long time, and now she signified, somewhat peremptorily, that they should go back. Then he took her hand.

"You are not angry with me, dear child ? I never found any eloquence so hard to withstand as yours, Barbara."

What did that matter, she thought, so that he did resist it ?

"I cannot bear to think that you misunderstand me," he went on : "things would be so much easier if I could explain them to you. I have a very sad weight at my heart, that no one must know,—not even my faithful little friend, Barbara."

"A secret, Norman ?"

"A secret—well, yes ; but it does not sound much in the telling. Many years ago—so many that I cannot count them, I made a promise—a foolish sort of promise it was, but unfortunately I said it in my prayers ; I was a boy then, remember, but I promised that if ever it were in my power to do a kindness to a certain person, I would do it ; well the time has come."

"Has this kindness, this promise, to do with your going away ?"

"Certainly."

"And it is in your power to do it ?"

"In my power, yes ; but it is not easy ; I may say that it is very difficult. Now you know why you make it hard for me."

"I will not," she returned regretfully; "why did you not tell me this before? Is it this that has made you look so stern and sad, so unlike yourself, Norman? It was very wrong to make such a promise: how would you know that circumstances might not prevent you from fulfilling it? Is there no other way of keeping your word than by going to America?"

"It makes it easier for me if I go away," he replied in a stifled voice. "Do not let us talk any more of it; it has changed my whole life so much, that I cannot bear to think about it. I do not know whether I owe it to you, Barbara, but I owe it to my own conscience to tell you that I shall never marry."

A quick-drawn breath, and then Barbara was herself again, but there was not a grain of colour in her face. It was all a mistake, then!

"I once hoped it would be otherwise;" Barbara gave a low sigh of relief; "but now I know it is impossible. We have been such dear friends, Barbara, that I felt I must tell you this,—that you, of all others, ought to know it. Do you understand me, dear child?"

Then she knew that he meant to tell her that he had so loved her, but that all such loving must be over. It must be a cold sort of love, she thought, that could speak to her like that; it sounded oddly, after Nigel.

"Do you understand me?" he asked again, this time almost severely.

"I do not know—I suppose I do; you mean that you had hoped one day to have a wife?"

"Yes, and that, for many, many reasons, I shall never have one now,—never, Barbara!"

"I understand you, Norman," she said quite calmly, considering the lump in her throat.

"I see you do. You are a brave child—a dear child, Barbara. I never met with such truthfulness as yours—never. I wonder how we shall meet again; suppose——" but then he stopped, and such a gleam lighted up his eyes; suppose, after all—in spite of all his treatment of her—she were to remain faithful to him—suppose she would not marry Nigel—would not his vow be rendered void by a year or two's absence? Certainly it would: if she were not married within two years, he must come back to her; and at this thought all his ruggedness and severity softened in a moment.

"You will not forget your old friend Norman?" he said aloud.

"Of course I will not forget you," she returned, in the same quiet voice, but her eyes looked reproachfully at him: if he had only not said that, she could have forgiven him, but he was too much absorbed in his own pain to spare her.

"No, I knew you would not. God bless you, dear, for all the happiness you have given me. I never thought to be talking to you like this—but—but——" He struggled with some powerful emotion for a moment, but not successfully, and then he remembered Nigel; was he acting quite fairly by him? Was he not leading her to suspect more than he had intended? He must still say a word or two that would leave her free to accept Nigel, if she chose; and he cast about in his own mind for a speech that would not cost him too dearly.

"Barbara," he said at length, "I think we understand each other now; you must not wish me to speak more plainly. I hope——" then in his scrupulous truth altering the word, "of course—I do not know how to put it; but, of course, if you meet any one whom you can like, who will help you, and help them all, it will be happier—it will be wiser."

Then she snatched her hand out of his grasp, with a look on her face that he never forgot.

"You can spare me the rest," she said, and there was a touch of scorn in her voice. "I think we had better go home now, Norman;" then he turned silently with her, and walked by her side till they came to the green door in the wall.

She was for turning in, hardly knowing what she was about, but he stopped her.

"Not like that, Barbara; surely you will say good-bye. Are you really angry with me, my dear?"

A sad quiver of her lips answered him; but as though to make amends, she held out her hand to him.

"One makes friends only to lose them," faltered Bab; "I never thought to lose you like this. Good-bye; thank you for all you have done for me," she finished, stammering painfully, and unable to look him in the face; she could not bear to pain him, but how was she to say she was not angry?

"Good-bye," he repeated, almost inaudibly; she looked such a little young creature as she stood there before him, that he was almost moved to take her in his arms as a child and press her to his heart; the impulse was strong upon him: if he had done so—if she had once felt his kiss—had once recognised the warmth and reality of his love, she would never have doubted him again—never have swerved from her loyal allegi-

ance to him ; but he repressed the wish, and only stood holding her cold hands in that strong grasp of his, as though he could not relinquish them.

"Oh, Norman, let me go," and her voice was fretful with misery.

"Yes, I will let you go, Barbara—little Barbara ; good-bye." She had a dim idea that he bade God bless her as she almost fled from him, hiding herself in the shrubberies till he had passed down the lane, and then stealing out again in the dark, like a hunted thing.

Her only thought was to be alone—alone in her trouble. Fearlessly she tracked one dark road after another, till she reached the little gate by the bracken, and there she turned in, rustling lightly over the dry heather, till she reached the hollow where she had sat with Nest, and there she threw herself down, and she and the firs had it out together.

And nobler confidants she could not have chosen ; their fragrant breath and hushed stillness soothed as nothing else could have soothed her, and drew out the pent-up pain.

Oh, Barbara—unhappy girl—the blessing and the curse of your womanhood is upon you, the terror and anguish of an uncrowned love. My heart is sore for you, as it is sore for all God's maidens to whom fate has given pitiful blanks—most sore for the sweetness and freshness of your youth, which is to fade as other women's have faded before you.

Oh, Barbara, winsome and brave and frolicsome no longer ! your broken-hearted child Barbara, lying at the roots of the dark pine-trees, with your young head buried in their dust of years, sobbing the tearless sobs of pain—wild—ungovernable, and clenching your little hands in rebellious misery ; alas, alas ! Barbara, Barbara !

Such outbursts exhaust themselves ; by and by comes the paralysis of pain, and then fierce arguments, anger, immeasurable scorn, presently infinite yearnings, passionate, pitiful ! Barbara passes through all these sad changes before she rises weak as a beaten child, feeling bruised and broken in every limb, and drags herself wearily from the spot. But she has suffered so that she will never look on the firs again without a shudder of remembrance. Blindfold she has walked over the nine burning ploughshares of iron ; no wonder if that scorching leaves scars to her dying day. Some of her thoughts will stamp themselves on her life for ever ; and bitterest of all was the thought that they had parted, and that she had not forgiven

him—that her anger and her love were so mingled together that she could not separate them. She felt in some dim inscrutable way that he was wronging her, that he was hiding something from her still, something of which she would not approve; it might be that that promise of his compelled his absence, but could a man be so bound that he might not take any woman to him to wife? This was what she could not understand. This coldness, the icy barrier of his reserve, was dreadful to her in her young vitality; she cried out against such love as his, it was not worthy of the name; he had told her almost plainly that he had chosen her for his wife, that at some time in his life he had striven and hoped to attain her; was she a child to be so wooed and won from her capricious dislike of him only to be put aside when the winning was certain? was he not bound to her, if not outwardly, at least by an unconscious understanding, by the very fact that he had so triumphed? was this less sacred to him than his promise? She had owned him for her lord and master, and had secretly done him homage in her heart, making sweetest promises of obedience and faith, and now she was driven to aver that he was the very hardest lord and master that a woman could have chosen.

But he had never loved her; he had honoured her with his friendship, and in a cold distant way was educating her to be his wife, till the loss of his money, and that inexplicable promise of his, made marriage impossible to him. If he had so loved her, could he have said that word to her—that it would be wiser for her to take some other man! Poor Bab! we can imagine her wearying herself amid all these blind gropings and vain conjectures; little did she guess the mistaken nobility that was the saddest secret of all.

No, it was all over—all over with the past, present, and future of Barbara Heathcote's life; so she told herself as she dragged herself heavily towards home; she had sickened of the safe monotony of her life, and had cried out for excitement and the good and evil knowledge of experience, and how awfully had her prayer been answered; she was walking on gladly in her own strength, and the ground had opened before her feet; one by one she could see her hopes crumbling beneath her, the strong arm on which she had hoped to lean was withdrawn with a suddenness that made her totter. Oh, what if in her blindness and her misery, made reckless by despair, she throws herself into the chasm, leaving her guardian angel standing mournfully on the brink!

Oh, hush ! do not blame her ! if she be faulty, if she disappoint us, are we any of us perfect ? Some sins are only the errors of love. Remember, the greatest of all virtues is charity.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"I AM GOING TO MARRY MY FRIEND."

"And in that time and place she answer'd me,
And in the compass of three little words,
More musical than ever came in one,
The silver fragments of a broken voice
Made me most happy, faltering, 'I am thine.'"

TENNYSON.

BARBARA saw no one that night, and the next day remained closely shut up in her den, ostensibly painting, but the colours dried on the palette before she had touched a brush. In the evening Dr. Heathcote wanted her to read to him, but she excused herself on the plea of a sick headache ; and finding that there was no other way to escape Hester's kind scrutiny, she was obliged to submit to her remedy and go early to bed.

But the next day the headache was so much worse, and there were such visible signs of depression and languor about her, that Hester persuaded her not to rise, and in her mental and bodily prostration, worn out by sleeplessness and pain, it was a relief to be allowed to lie quiet and be tended ; all the more that Hester was a very thoughtful nurse, and abstained from all comment and questioning. If any doubt arose in her own mind as to the cause of Bab's sudden indisposition, she did not put it into words ; perhaps she remembered the time when she too had turned her face to the wall, and felt that her life was bitter to her. It was certainly a new thing to see Bab lying there with her white face and heavy eyelids, but perhaps, after all, it was only the loss of her home that was troubling her ; it would be wiser not to put any fresh thoughts into her head, and treat her only for a bad headache ; and then she changed the fragrant cloths on Barbara's forehead, putting back the girl's heavy hair tenderly, and moving softly across the darkened room.

Bab lay quiet and submitted gratefully ; she seemed to have no powers of resistance ; the very wish to move was gone from her. Not that such a state was long possible to a person

of Bab's temperament. About noon the next day she grew suddenly restless, and that evening, throwing off every trace of illness, began dressing herself, and, though weak and with trembling fingers, refusing all Hester's offers of assistance, putting her aside in her abrupt fashion; she felt quite well now, she remarked, her headache was gone, she was less feverish, and she only wanted air.

"A pretty sort of convalescence, Barbara," said Hester, half disposed to be angry; "I never saw you look so ill in my life," an opinion in which Bab was obliged to agree when she looked in the glass; the big eyes were bigger and brighter than ever, with those purple lines round them, and her face was quite wan. "I look about as limp and flabby as an old hat," remarked Bab with grim humour; "I wish Miss Vokes would lend me her green silk;" and then she went downstairs, her knees knocking together with weakness, but still refusing Hester's arm; she went down the lawn in the same tottery fashion, and was glad when she reached the low stone step of the summer-house. The air revived her, as she knew it would, and then her restlessness returned; no one came near her; Ruth and Connie were out, she knew, and Hester had said something about going down to the village; still Leigh and her father were in the house; Dr. Heathcote was resting after his day's work, and Leigh was with him. It was very odd that neither came to look after her.

Suddenly it occurred to her that to-day was the time appointed for her answer to Nigel; she had quite forgotten it,—perhaps he had been already. Hester had said something about a visitor that had detained her in the afternoon, but Barbara had thought she meant Mr. Herbert; perhaps Nigel had called as well, and had heard she was ill. She began to breathe freely, and then all at once she remembered he was rather given to repeat his visits; it was still early in the evening, he might walk up after dinner. He had said that he would see her that day week, and he was given to keep with some tenacity to his purpose; the idea gave her cold chills; she determined that, say what he would, he should not draw her from her father's side to-night, and with this resolution she hastened to the house with as much speed as her weakness would allow.

Leigh was standing half in and half out of the drawing-room window, and looking very disconsolate; he held up his hand warningly, with a gesture of silence, and hurried to meet her.

"Strath is in there talking to my father,—don't interrupt them," he said, taking her arm in his old fashion and turning her round to the shrubberies; "bless me, what a dingy dolly the child looks, to be sure; and how your hand shakes, Barbara!"

"St. Ronans is in there with Daddy?" repeated Barbara, with a sudden sinking at heart; it was not the first time she had felt he was too much for her.

"Yes; I cannot think what they're talking about: it seems a very earnest sort of conversation, and Strath looks as grave as a judge; they won't let me into the secret. There I have been airing myself, and feeling as glum as possible; I can't stand seeing the governor fret himself as he is doing. Mark my word, Barbara; I don't want to frighten you, but if this goes on he will have another stroke."

"What do you mean? Has there anything fresh happened?" and Barbara felt as though she had neglected her father selfishly in her trouble.

"Don't you know? Oh, I forgot you have been mewed up in your den these two days, with Hester mounting dragon over you. How do you like her sisterly attendance, eh? Here's Ruth been trying hard to get at you; but she declares Hester is jealous, and insists on monopolising you. Well, I can't say you speak well for her nursing; you look a regular little misery."

"Oh, do be quiet, Gyp," returned Barbara impatiently, "and go on with what you were saying."

"What was I saying? let me see. Well, did you not know we have had two people after the house?"

"No; Hester never told me. I suppose she did not want to trouble me. Why, who can they be?"

"Sir Geoffrey Hunsden was one; he is a good fellow—'pon honour he is," said Leigh, with a droll imitation of Geoffrey's manner of repeating his favourite expression; "but the Pater saw through his little game directly; he would have it that it was a peace-offering for treating Hester so badly, and would not even treat with the agent. You know the grand way Dad has when he is up on the high horse: he glared through his spectacles at the unfortunate man, till his red hair rose quite on end; if you had heard the tone in which he bade him take back his answer to Sir Geoffrey Hunsden! He as much as told him that Geoff shouldn't have an inch belonging to him."

"Oh! I am so sorry: Geoffrey meant to be kind," murmured Barbara; "what a good brother he would have been to us, Leigh."

"Yes, no end jolly. I was awfully sorry that that affair came to an end. What a heap of disappointments we are to the governor. I shouldn't wonder, Barbara, should you, if Strath were coming just for the same reason? he's rich, and generous for anything."

"Oh, I hope not," said Bab, with a return of her faintness. She was trying to drive off the subject, but Leigh would recur to it. "Do you mind sitting down, dear?" then as he complied, "you have not told me who the second person was."

"Oh, true; well, it was Mrs. Deanes;" and as Barbara held up her hands in horror, "I am afraid she wants it very badly, Dame Muffet; her family is large and growing up, and no one will take pity on her girls; and serve them right, too—a lot of over-dressed simpletons. She says their present house is so small, that they are overcrowded, and that as there's not another to be found in the neighbourhood, they must build, unless we follow the direct leadings of Providence and turn out to please them."

"Leigh, don't joke about anything so dreadful."

"That's how she put it; she did indeed, 'pon honour, Barbara," with another sly drawl.

"But when did she come; and how did she know the house was to be sold?"

"She was here this afternoon. Such a piece of work! Of course Durnford is ringing with the news of the doctor's losses. I am afraid Mrs. Deanes's tongue won't smooth things for him there: she gave him such a lecture on the selfishness of putting his family to such risks; I believe she thought he had been gambling. Poor old Dad! he very nearly cried when she had gone. It was too bad to set on him now he is down; he will never hold up his head again."

"Why did not Hester tell me?" said Barbara excitedly, as she got up and began pacing the shrubby path restlessly. "That odious woman! but she shall not have the house to triumph over us. Think of Katie, and Amelia, and all those unmannerly girls taking possession of our dear old rooms! Leigh, I tell you she shall not have it."

"I am afraid she must, Babchen," replied Leigh mournfully, now showing his real feeling. "She has talked Dad into giving her the refusal of the house, and so putting himself

completely into her power. Never mind," he added kindly, as he saw Bab's uncontrollable vexation; "the house must have a purchaser, and I don't think it need matter to us who has it, if we are not to live in it ourselves; that is a very small matter: what is more important to us is the bad effect it is having on the Pater."

"Do you mean he is fretting over it?" she asked, with a great longing to go and comfort him. Why had she given in to her selfish grief, and kept away from him these two days? "If he be ill, Norman must see him," she finished, forcing herself painfully to say that name.

"Oh, of course Norman has seen him: but that does not make us much easier; he only says, word for word, what I told you just now—that he must be kept from worry, and that there was sufficient agitation about him to induce another stroke; he says there is a pressure on his mind—as if we did not know that already—and that, unless it were removed, he would not answer for the consequences; he has ordered him off work for a day or two, and recommended the strictest quiet. It is no good fretting over it, Babchen," he added, as he saw her utter misery: "of course he is the dearest and the best father living," here Leigh almost broke down, "but I don't see how we can help him here; and that's the mischief of it."

"Don't you? perhaps I do," returned Barbara, with set lips, as she resumed her restless walk. Weakness was forgotten in her agitation; she was spared further questioning by Leigh being called off; a moment after he returned, looking greatly amazed.

"Father wants you, Barbara. Strath is still there, and talking hard; the best of it is, they've ordered me away again. So I'm off to the mill, to fetch Ruth."

A terror, such as her brave spirit had never known before in her life, came over Barbara, and she almost clung to her brother.

"Oh, don't leave me; do go in with me, Gyp," she implored.

He looked at her in inconceivable astonishment.

"Are you crazy, Bab? Why, there is only your precious St. Ronans in there: he won't eat you, I suppose."

"How do I know that? Don't think me silly, but I do wish you would come."

"But I can't, child; do, pray, be sensible. How am I to go in when Dad particularly desired to speak to you alone?"

It is hard lines, being kept out of some pretty little secret, but there is no help for it; come, run along. I never knew you were such a goose as to be nervous before." Did he know what she feared? Perhaps he did. There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes, and a pleased, excited look in his face. "Come, Bab," with a boyish push, "pluck up your courage, and be off with you;" and then she turned her back on him, and walked slowly to the house. Her fate was too hard for her; her temptation had come in her hour of weakness. She knew as certainly what they would say to her, and how she would answer them, as she knew that her trustful faith was gone from her, and that her heart was breaking; and yet she never hesitated, but walked straight into her father's presence.

Nigel rose, much shocked when he saw her; but she never looked at him; she quietly crossed the room, and knelt down by Dr. Heathcote's arm-chair, first putting up her face to be kissed, like a child.

"You sent for me, dear father," she said gently. "I have not seen you since yesterday, have I?—except for a minute; and Leigh says you are not very well; you want your nurse back, Daddy."

"I always want her," said the doctor fondly. "This girl of mine can be ill spared. Barbara, my love, have you spoken to your old friend?"

"How do you do, St. Ronans?" said Barbara, without looking at him, however; but he was not to be put off; he came round and shook hands with her, and said how grieved he was to hear of her indisposition. He had come over to speak to her, but finding her so unwell, had talked to Dr. Heathcote instead; he hoped she would forgive him. Barbara's face looked downcast and sad as he spoke; she fingered little tunes on her father's arm, without answering; seeing which, he and the doctor exchanged glances, and Nigel withdrew into the background. Barbara did not see the glances: she was having a frightened argument with herself; how ill her father looked, how fearfully worn; there was a strained bloodshot look in his eyes too, and an added feebleness in his voice which had not escaped her. Nigel's tone, too, alarmed her; it was gentle, but it was dictatorial, almost triumphant; the vague apology was only assumed; of course she knew what he had said, and that he had meant to say it; her opinion of his generosity was changing now; the lines of her mouth set and hardened as she fingered those tunes.

"My dear," said Dr. Heathcote, taking her restless hand, "it seems to me, my Bab is growing a woman; can you guess what Nigel Strath has been telling me just now?" and he eyed her proudly through his spectacles, till they became dewy, and he had to take them off to wipe them.

"Telling you? oh yes," she returned, with a steady composure that surprised them both; "of course I can't pretend not to understand. I know very well what you mean, Daddy."

"She is right, doctor," returned Nigel in a forced voice. Barbara's calmness staggered him.

"You know that he wants my little daughter. Did you know that, Barbara?"

"I knew it, father."

"You knew it, and never confided in your old Daddy—fie, Bab!"

"You had too much to trouble you; you could not have borne it. I longed to tell you," she answered, laying her head on his knees. The doctor smoothed her hair with a trembling hand: the ripples were quite crazy to-night.

"You had some reason beyond this for not telling me, Barbara," he said at length.

"Had I? oh dear! oh dear! it seems so long ago, that I almost forget. I daresay I had; well, you know it now, father. This day week—it seems like a month ago—but it was only this day week, St. Ronans asked me to be his wife: he had asked me once before." The quiet manner in which she stated the fact made Nigel start as though he had been stung; her tone was simply indifferent.

"And you gave him no direct answer. Is this what has been making you ill, Barbara?"

"No, it has not made me ill," she returned, with perfect truth.

"Well, I am glad of that; these girls never know their own mind, Nigel. Barbara, my child, you and I must talk over this matter a little; you have no idea how generous he is, how worthy of my Barbara's love;" then Barbara knew that his heart was set on her marrying him.

"Father, I know everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, I know what he will do for us—about the house and Leigh; but that is not the point. Father, how much did my mother love you when she married you?" then a flush came into the doctor's worn face.

"Why do you ask me that, Barbara?"

"Never mind why, Daddy, but I do ask it. I dearly love my mother, I often think of her; she used to give me sweeter kisses than any one has ever given me since; she was the dearest, the dearest——" the girl was fast becoming hysterical, but restrained herself. "I wish she were here now, father, to help me in this."

"My poor Hester! I wish she were."

"I don't think she will mind you telling what I want to hear. She was a very young girl, and a governess, I know, when you married her; she must have been very fond of you."

"I was not her first love, Barbara," said her father, in some emotion.

"Oh! were you not! that was bad—bad for her, I mean; but she loved us all so tenderly. I suppose, then, she married you because you were her friend."

"Yes," replied the doctor, drawn on by her simplicity to answer her, "because I was her friend, and she was so lonely and unhappy. I was not the man to attract a young creature like that, and so admired as she was; but I don't think she ever regretted marrying me."

"Of course not. I remember how she used to look at you: she told Essie one day that you were the best man living. But what became of the other one, Dad? did she ever see him again?"

"My child, what makes you so curious? You must forgive our Barbara, Nigel; she has odd ways sometimes. What has brought your mother into your head, Bab? I never heard you talk like this before."

"Father, I do so want to know about her; never mind anything else just now. But did she ever see him again?"

"Yes, child, yes; he was not worthy of her love: she found that out afterwards."

"Before she married you?"

"Yes, of course. She was sore, poor thing, and lonely, without a friend in the world; so I just took her home and cared for her. Oh, I don't think there was another woman like your mother, Barbara."

"And she married you because you were her friend, and you helped her."

"Let us change the subject, little one; you have forgotten Nigel."

"No, I have not forgotten him," repeated Barbara, in a

strange dreamy voice ; she had her head still on her father's knee, and was reaching up to it and stroking his beard with restless fingers, as she talked. Nigel sat watching the little hands admiringly ; if this were his third wooing, it was a very silent one.

"Bab, my dear," remonstrated the doctor mildly.

"Dad, leave me alone. I am thinking of my mother ; she was young, I know, younger than I, and broken-hearted ; she had a lover, and he disappointed her, and she married her friend. It sounds sad, doesn't it ? but somehow it ended happily. She would not like to see you look as you look now, Daddy, so grey, and worn, and ill ; and oh, how sorry she would be for Leigh !" her head weighed heavily on his knee for a moment, and something like a sob rose to her lips ; and then she struggled wearily to her feet.

"One kiss, one kiss, Daddy," she said, stooping over him ; "you must give me one kiss for my mother's sake ;" and she put her arms round his neck, almost pressing the grey head to her bosom, and then she crossed the room and stood before St. Ronans.

"I am yours, Nigel," she faltered, holding out her hand to him ; then, as he started up, searching her face with keen incredulous eyes ; "it is not the right sort of love, I know, but I will try to be good to you ; indeed, I will try very hard to be good."

"Barbara, do you mean it ? Do you know what you are doing ?"

"Yes," she answered calmly ; "I am going to marry my friend."

"You really mean what you say ? you will not repent it—you will not go back from your word ?" he continued in a tremulous voice.

"I never go back from my word, St. Ronans," she returned proudly. "Bab is yours, if you want her."

"If I want her ! Oh, my darling, my darling !" He sat down for a moment, still holding her before him, and drew her hands before his eyes. She stood by him quite passively, only casting rather piteous looks at her father ; but when Nigel uncovered his face, she was surprised to see that blueness of the lips again.

"I am not strong just yet," he said, speaking lightly to disguise his pain, "and you have tried me so ; but it is all over now, dear, is it not ?" and then he took her to her father.

"She consents, Nigel."

"Yes, she consents. I have her at last ; but she was hard enough to win ; I must hold my treasure tightly."

"Are you happy, Daddy ?"

"Very, very happy. God bless my Barbara !"

"Do you bless me really ! Is that your hand upon my head ? Are you sure it will be a true blessing, Daddy ? Do you think I have done right ?"

"Quite right, my dearest, and as your father would have wished you. Give me your hand, Nigel ; you have won my girl gallantly. She is not handsome, and I do not know that she is specially good, except to her father ; but I should hardly think a king worthy of my Barbara."

"I will take care of her, sir," he answered, and such tenderness shone in his grey eyes ; to any other girl he would have seemed the beau ideal of a lover : but Barbara never looked once away from her father.

"I am so glad I have made you happy, Daddy," she whispered ; "that, at any rate, is worth living for. You will never have to leave the dear old house now : Nigel has promised to see to that, and to Leigh too."

"That is all understood, Barbara," returned Nigel quickly.

"Yes, I know, but I want to make him happy. You are better now, dear, are you not ? Leigh will never be a trouble to you again."

"There is a great weight lifted off me," mused the doctor. "Who would have thought of anything so fortunate, that my little Barbara should be the mistress of St. Ronans ? I declare I must tell Norman myself." Then she shivered slightly, and buried her face in his breast.

"We are tiring Dr. Heathcote, I am afraid ;" and St. Ronans touched her hand gently, as it hung down by her side.

"Ay, go with Nigel," said the doctor, smiling ; "he is impatient to have you to himself, I see. Run away, my precious, or he will be getting jealous of your old father ;" then she rose wearily at his bidding, and followed Nigel out on the dusky lawn.

"I shall bring my mother to-morrow, Barbara," he said, as they slowly paced the terrace.

"Your mother ! Oh yes, I understand : of course, I must see Lady Strath."

"And you will try to love her ?"

"I don't know that it will be any use trying," she answered sadly; "but I will do my best."

"For my sake?" he pleaded.

"Yes, for your sake, if you will. I don't think she likes me, but I will do what I can for all that."

"And I may give your love to her?"

"Yes, you may do that if you will, and to Nest, too; but Nigel, don't let her come here—not yet, I mean?"

"Who? Nest?"

"Yes. I don't want to see her: let her write to me, if she likes. Tell her that I said so. When I am happier—stronger, I mean—I will come to her myself." Then he promised her gently that he would fulfil her behest.

"Geoffrey makes her very happy," he said, after another pause.

"I am glad of that—dear Nest!" she checked an involuntary sigh. "Well, she is good; she deserves all he can give her, does she not, St. Ronans?"

"The old name, Barbara!" he returned reproachfully.

"I beg your pardon, I ought to have said Nigel. Indeed, I will do all you wish," she added, with a sad submission that went to his heart. He would rather have had her answer petulantly than that. "I suppose it comes more naturally to me: you must forgive me, Nigel."

"Must I? How humbly you ask. Can this be Barbara who is speaking?"

"I don't know; I suppose so. I think the old Barbara Heathcote is dead: I feel as though I have lost my own identity, and must pinch myself to be sure I am Bab!"

"How scared and wild you look!" then, in a quick vehement tone that startled her, "Barbara, have you any idea how I love you?"

"Yes, I think so," she answered in the same weary way; "but I wonder——"

"You wonder at what, my dearest?"

"That you can be so content with your bargain,—that you can give me so much, I mean, and be satisfied with so little in return."

"I never said I was satisfied," he returned gravely. Then she glanced a frightened glance at him.

"Nigel, you have my word."

"Your word! yes, of course, I know I have won you, you startled thing; but what a winning! but for my love it were

something pitiful. Don't I feel you panting and struggling under my hand, like a snared bird : you are not tamed yet, my darling !”

Oh, how was she broken, that she had no answer to that ! The small head reared itself proudly a minute, and then drooped heavily, heavily : he had a right ; ay, surely he had a right now.

“And you thought I was satisfied ; well, so I am for the present. But I shall never rest, never be content, till you love me, as I know you can love, Barbara ! Look how passively your hand lies in mine !”

“Too true,” she murmured.

“I am not blaming you ; I know you have given me all you can,—that it is not your fault that your heart is cold to me.”

“God knows it is not !” came through her white lips.

“How wearily you speak ! I can hardly think it is Barbara ; and so wan and weak too. Dear, I would not reproach you for worlds—to-night of all nights too. Do I not know for what you are marrying me ? have you ever deceived me ? You are sacrificing yourself for your father's sake ? I, for one cannot find fault with your nobility.”

“You are very generous,” she faltered.

“What ?—generous to myself ; you are a part of myself I verily believe ; you have not done wrong to trust yourself to me : as far as I can make it, your life shall be sunshine.”

“I hope I shall be good to you,” she answered, trying to speak gratefully.

“Good to me ! of course you will ; not but what Bab has plenty of faults, but they will be beauties in my eyes.”

“I wish you would not talk so, St. Ronans.”

“Nigel, Barbara—Nigel ;” then she repeated his name with a dreary meekness that gave him pain.

“Barbara, what ails you ?” he asked at last anxiously.

“I am tired, and my head aches ; should you mind it very much, if I went in ?” for she felt as though she could endure it no longer : then he reluctantly permitted her to leave him. The love-making had been on his side hitherto ; but, considering all things, she had not borne herself so much amiss. True, she had moved, and looked, and spoken with a sort of dazed monotony, as though she were passing through some dream ; but there had been a submissive gentleness with it all that touched him greatly.

She had said to him that Barbara Heathcote was dead ; and as she went through her tedious undressing, with aching limbs and that numb pain in her head, she told herself that to all intents and purposes she had spoken the truth ; that the old Barbara, her other self, would never have felt this weakness, this utter blank, this absence of all thought and individuality : her face was moist, and she put up her hand and found it was wet with her tears ; why was she crying, she wondered ? She was too tired even to feel unhappy—oh ! far too tired ; and then she began sobbing weakly, as she lay down in her bed.

But, waking shortly after midnight, she thought she heard Norman's voice close beside her, saying the same old words, "Be faithful, Barbara !" and sat up trembling and shivering, till she remembered it was only a dream ; there was a streak of starlight when she woke, then a broad space of darkness ; by and by grey dawn, and the twitter of waking birds. Hitherto she had sat quite motionless ; but as the first sunbeam touched her window-sill, she pulled at the curtain impatiently, to shut out the day, and lay down with her face hidden in the pillows, as she had lain among the firs that night, crying out that she could not, she could not,—that her truth had gone from her, and that she was Nigel's now,—that she must be faithful to no one but Nigel !

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE SHRUBBERY.

"Robbed, robbed of life's illusions sweet ;
Love dead outside her closed door,
And passion fainting at her feet,
To wake no more.

"No more but this, the partial care,
The natural kindness for its own,
The trust that waxeth unaware
As worth is known.

"And yet, O good, O wise and true,
I would for all my fealty
That I could be as much to you
As you to me."

JEAN INGELOW.

SUCH a night was not the best preparation for a trying day. Barbara realised this with some dismay, when she found the

rising from her bed difficult on account of her weakness ; during the mechanical portions of her dressing, she rehearsed drearily the part she must play during the next few hours ; there were the congratulations of her sisters and Leigh to be gone through ; her heart sank as she thought of it ; how was she to comport herself, and manifest no open repugnance, when they overwhelmed her with their expressions of joy ? She must show herself grateful for their good wishes, and as happy in her changed circumstances as would be compatible with truth. They must know nothing about the inward sinking, and the sleeplessness, and the tears : if they remarked her altered looks, she must shield herself under the plea of illness ; they must never guess that she had so suffered, that the brave spirit was utterly broken. The part was a difficult one, she knew, but she must go through with it ; there must be no halting, no half-measures, no drawing back, if she were to make her sacrifice complete. The thing was done : she had given her word, "for better, for worse ;" she knew that now, as surely as though she had said them before the altar. "Whatever comes is all in the day's work, after all," said Bab, as she sat with half-extinguished eyes on the edge of her chair. "It is no good thinking what I am to say or do, to this or that person ; better take every moment as it comes, and do the best with it that I can."

Poor philosophy ! leaning on her own strength, as usual ; but the reed was of sufficient stability not to give way beneath her weight for some time yet.

But that interview with Lady Strath would be the hardest : not even for Nigel's sake could she even bring herself to like her. There was something under all her smoothness and soft-spoken words which roused an antagonistic spirit in Barbara, and which her fearless honesty could not brook ; it was difficult to express what this really was, but in her own mind Bab convicted her of covert insincerity and all manner of pleasant guile ; and if one had asked her frankly for her opinion, she would have confessed that, in spite of her plausible ways, she would have sooner been caressed by a serpent than by Lady Strath. Of course this was not charitable, and indeed a positive injury to Lady Strath ; but Barbara had strong likes and dislikes of her own, and was much given to express both rather loudly, till she grew somewhat dumb with her grief.

And then there was that telling of Norman, and Norman's mother. He would see that she had taken him at his word : would he despise her for it ? would he think that Nigel's wealth

had tempted her? He had always treated her thoughts as visionary, and never believed her capable of real sacrifice. Ah! herein, she felt, lay the true martyrdom: she had lowered herself, perhaps, in the eyes of the man she loved; she was acting so, that he could not but misapprehend her. True, he had so left her that any one might woo her without blame; but then to be won so easily, a mere lapse of days, a quick asking, an impulsive answer!—how could she hope that he possessed the clue to her real meaning? how could he know that despair, and generosity, and the yearnings of filial love had impelled her to this course. He was a man one-sided and much given to harsh judgment, rather prone to impute low motives to others, and yet trying himself by an almost unattainable standard of excellence: in all probability, and according to his lights he would judge her dispassionately, and in the end misunderstand her altogether. “I think if he only knew why I am doing it,” she sighed, “and the necessity, the dreadful necessity, for it all, I could go through with it, and not feel it so utterly unbearable; but, there, he will never know!” She was sick with the desire for his approbation: if he could only have laid his hand on hers, and said, “You have done well, Bab,—we are both suffering, but I think it is for the right,” she would have felt comparatively happy; at least, the sting of misery would have been drawn; she would have lost that sense of hardness that so oppressed her; she would have found that theirs was a community of sorrow—that he was as faithful and loving at the core as she; she would have replaced him on his pedestal, and made much ado over it with sweet womanly worship. Ah, but, so knowing, would she ever have left him? would any amount of self-sacrifice and abnegation on his part have torn her from his side—true helpmeet to his true manhood, whom only death must divide? No; cruel as it was, it was easier for her to act as she did, believing him coldly indifferent, changed to her by alien circumstances, and judging her with a harsh judgment all the more that he had once loved her.

Hester’s entrance roused her from these tormenting thoughts, and she made haste to brush her hair over her eyes, to gain a moment’s obscurity; but under her long veil she saw Hester’s face was radiant.

“Good-morning, Essie.”

“Yes, good-morning indeed! What do you mean, you provoking child, running away to bed and shutting yourself up without bidding any of us good-night? Nigel said that your

head ached : he was obliged to apologise, you see ; but I know it was a shy fit."

"My head did ache, Essie."

"Did it, dear ? I am so sorry ; and last evening of all evenings, too. All this excitement is too much for you : you must take care, or we shall be having you ill in earnest."

No answer ; the brushes worked steadily.

"Well, Barbara !"

"Well, Essie !"

"How long am I to wait till that funny little face comes to view ? Oh dear ! oh dear ! and such a pale one too ;" and her tone changed to one of motherly commiseration. "How ill you look, Barbara. What is the matter ?"

"I have not slept well," stammered Barbara.

"You need not tell me that, child," replied Hester, kissing her. "They say being in love is wearing work, and I daresay it is to any one so excitable as you ; but now everything has come right, you must try and take it more quietly." Hester thought she had discovered the cause of Barbara's indisposition now ; that she had been secretly in love with Nigel all along, never daring to expect that her hopes would be realised ; and the little that Doctor Heathcote had told her on the subject had done much to confirm her in this opinion.

"I don't know about taking it quietly," returned Barbara, running her hand through her hair in her usual fashion, but speaking in a strangely subdued voice. "I scarcely know yet whether I am awake or dreaming."

"No, of course not," was the soothing answer. "Things have come so quickly that they have startled you ; but, Barbara, you must let me congratulate you."

"Don't, Essie."

"Why not, you silly child ?"

"Because—because I hate being congratulated," she returned, with a shade of her old manner, only for its sadness. "Don't you remember what I once said on that subject, Essie ?"

"Yes, I know," replied Hester, slightly wincing at the recollection ; "but that was different. You were very right to refuse me your congratulations then, because you knew," with a sudden honest blush, "that I did not really love Geoffrey,—that I was marrying him for reasons of my own."

Barbara still pushed her fingers through her hair wearily.

"Don't let us go back to that. I believe," she faltered, "I am afraid I was rather hard on you then."

"Not harder than I deserved," she replied; "but you are right, and we have pleasanter things to think of this morning. I am so glad of it for your sake, dear."

"And I am glad that you are pleased, Essie."

"Why, I should think so. Could anything have happened more fortunately? I think we ought all to sing a *Te Deum* on our knees" ("Heaven forbid!" thought Barbara). "I don't believe any one could be more noble in his generosity than Nigel. Why, he has been telling us that all father's debts shall be cleared, and the house assured to him, and that he will provide for Leigh's future; and he does it all so easily, too, that one quite loses the sense of obligation. Ruth is quite enthusiastic in his praise; and oh, you should have heard Leigh. Indeed, indeed, I am very glad."

"Why do you sigh, Essie?"

"I think it is well to be you, Barbara, and be loved like that; not that I grudge it to you, dear."

Barbara pressed her hand without speaking: speech was somewhat difficult just now; but she was beginning to think one of her dreaded troubles was over, when Connie burst in.

"Breakfast is ready; where is she, Hester? Oh, there she is;" and Connie pounced upon her breathlessly. "Many, many, happy returns of the day—of yesterday, I mean," gasped out Connie ecstatically. "Oh, Bab, he's a regular darling."

"Don't, Con, you are strangling me;" and she sat helplessly grasping her brushes.

"But, Barbara, why don't you speak? Here's the Prince come at last for Cinderella; and Cinderella looking as glum as her own ashes. And such a beautiful Prince! I am half in love with him myself. I declare, if it were not for Sydney," and here Connie stopped bashfully, shaking her yellow curls and looking at her eldest sister.

"Nonsense, Connie; don't you see that Barbara has had a bad night, and looks as tired as possible. We must not quite overwhelm her with our attentions."

"No; but, Barbara, tell me, are you not happy?" persisted Connie; and kneeling down before her, and bringing her bright face on a level with hers; "and is he not handsome?"

"Yes, he is very handsome, Connie."

"And good and rich and generous, and everything that a Prince should be?" went on Connie joyfully.

"Yes; he's all that and much more."

"And you love him?"

"And I love him," repeated Barbara, thankful that she could say so much.

"Well, then, why don't you look happier? Don't you think it a very wonderful thing that he should choose you and not Hester? To tell you the truth," continued Connie frankly, "I can't understand that part at all; not but what you are a dear little thing enough, but then no one would think you equal to him."

"I am quite of your opinion," said Barbara, with a queer smile. Connie was accustomed to tell these unpleasant truths; she called it speaking her mind.

"Well, what makes you so aggravating, then? Here he's been and put you on I can't tell you how high a pedestal, and is telling everybody you are perfection, and all that, and just as gravely too as though he thought we believed him, and we not daring to contradict him, and tell him what a tiresome, changeable little lady you really are; and instead of being as proud as a peacock, there you sit with your 'Yes' and your 'Noes, Connie,' and your shut-up eyes, and not looking a bit pretty either—only Bab."

"Have you finished, Con?"

"Yes, I have finished," grumbled Connie, with another hug. "I have been putting you through your Catechism, and very badly you've repeated it. I'll go down and tell Leigh I'm disgusted with you."

"Yes, go," agreed Hester, coming quickly to Barbara's rescue. "She'll never get dressed while you are chattering there;" and then she stood quietly by while Barbara completed her unfinished toilet, putting in skilful touches here and there, but without much effect; do what she would, the grey dress and the blue ribbons were decided failures to-day.

"Now for it," thought Bab, as she crept slowly down the stairs. Ben, lying on the mat, did not know his mistress's weary footfall, and wagged his tail very feebly as she passed. She opened the door quite nervously, in anticipation of Leigh's greeting, and not without cause at the hugging she got: another time she might have enjoyed that, and his warm kisses, but now!

"That will do, Gyp."

"That will do, indeed! Why have you kept me waiting for like this? Do you know the first congratulation belongs to me? What a brick you are, Babchen!"

"He is, you mean," she said, trying hard to speak lightly

and in her old manner, but almost breaking down as she passed into Ruth's open arms, her low-uttered, "I am so happy, dearest," very nearly over-setting her. "Dear, dear, how kind everybody is! But Daddy is the best;" and she put down her hand on his shoulder for a moment, as she took the chair by his side.

"He is, indeed," continued Leigh teasingly. "So you've brought the name on the tapis, have you? 'Oh, don't leave me; do go in with me, Gyp,' that was what you said last night, was it not?" And then as the blood rose in a torrent to her face: "The sly little Babchen, she knew what was coming when she made up that pitiful face. Who would have thought that Dame Muffet was to make the grandest match in the family?"

"Only Bab," chimed in Connie.

"Only Bab! I vow it must be Barbara now. Why, how the child blinks at the light, like a regular owl. Who would have thought that a fellow like Strath should be taken with that furze-bush of a head, and those great eyes; have you bewitched him, you elf?"

"Oh, please do leave me alone," she implored.

"Leave you alone—not a bit of it. Don't you know that you are to be fêted and caressed by a grateful family? You're a public benefactor, Bab, that's what you are. Leave you alone, indeed!"

"But if I ask you as a favour, Gyp?"

"Nonsense; and now she's pretending to look grave."

"That's because the Prince is not here," put in Connie mischievously. "He'll come presently with the pumpkin, and the mice, and the rest of it, and Cinderella will wake up then."

"It is as good as a fairy tale," protested Leigh. "Fancy Bab being a subject for a fairy tale; and when we had all made up our minds, too, that she was to marry Norman."

"Norman is too ugly," exclaimed Connie. Barbara turned with a face of agony to her father:

"Oh, Daddy, my head aches so; cannot you find anything to cure it?" She might have said her heart too with equal truth: poor child! Leigh's talk was unendurable.

"Be quiet, children! A truce with your nonsense. Barbara, when you have finished your breakfast, you had better take a turn in the garden, my dear; that will do your head more good than anything. It is only over-excitement and

want of sleep." And when she had gratefully made her escape : "You must not say much to her just now, Leigh, her spirits are too fluctuating : leave her to herself and Nigel Strath. She was very near an hysterical fit just now, with your teasing."

"Poor little Bab," muttered Leigh remorsefully.

"We must be very careful of our girl," continued the doctor proudly ; "she is not very strong just now—I think all our troubles have tried her ; and for the present she is too overstrained even to feel the sensible relief that we feel. To think what my Barbara has done for us all !" he finished with some emotion, as he rose to look after her.

He found her wandering aimlessly in the shrubberies, but she brightened up at his approach ; he walked up and down with her a long time, speaking now and then on indifferent subjects, admiring a flower here and a shrub there, till her agitation had subsided, and she could listen and take interest, and answer him gratefully : it was the first restful moment that had been hers for a long time, leaning on his arm, with his cheerful kindly voice in her ears ; it did her heart good to see that the flushed unnatural look had passed from his face : true, it was more deeply lined and worn than she had ever seen it, and there was still the feebleness of convalescence about him ; but his voice was genial as ever, and he laughed out once or twice over a joke of his own devising, his eyes twinkling in their old way ; it was no small relief to her to see him like this after what Leigh had told her. She had saved his life, it might be, at the sacrifice of her happiness ; and as she walked to and fro with him in the fresh sunshine, she told herself that, in spite of everything, she had done well—that she did not repent it. An interruption came all too soon. Dr. Heathcote was wanted in the surgery : the new assistant was on view. He was just saying a word to Barbara about Nigel, and the generous way in which he had acted towards them, when Connie summoned him. Barbara accompanied him back to the house, still hanging on his arm.

"I think I will go in, too," she said, "for Lady Strath is sure to be here soon ;" and she had hardly spoken before they heard wheels coming up the carriage drive. On such an occasion Lady Strath would never have consented to dispense with ceremony. Connie danced delightedly up the gravel walk, much as Barbara would have done a month ago ; now the little feet dragged wearily along.

"There are the pumpkin, and the mice, and the fairy god-

mother, and the beautiful young Prince and all ; come along, Cindy dear, and don't keep him waiting."

"Hold your tongue, you little puss," returned Dr. Heathcote good-humouredly ; "they're all jealous of you—that's what it is, Barbara. Connie knows that long-legged Sydney of hers is not fit to hold the stirrup for Bab's knight ; go in to them, my dear, and as soon as Norman has finished with me I will come to you ;" and with this promise she was obliged to let him go.

Lady Strath had received the news of her son's success very quietly, and without fretting him with any unnecessary fuss ; the thought that Barbara was to become her daughter-in-law was still as unpalatable as ever, but all the same she could not refrain from some inward self-gratulation at the thought that she had triumphed over Norman ; she had looked upon him as her son's rival, and fought him, not without a species of courage, with his own weapons, knowing that no crookedness of dealing would avail her here ; she had thrown herself into Nigel's hopes so entirely that it would have been wormwood and gall to have been defeated in her ends, but nevertheless she had shown a very moderate pleasure in her victory. "You must go and see her to-morrow, mother," Nigel had said to her with his sweetest smile, and more for that than for any wish to see his betrothed she had yielded ; but now, as she saw her come into the room, she was fain to confess that the prize was a mean one, hardly worth the winning, and any triumph she might feel was swallowed up in a feeling of intense astonishment that Nigel should be so poor a fool for his pains.

Much of Barbara's good looks were dependent on her vivacity of expression, and also the wholesome colouring with which health and an open-air life had gifted her ; sleeplessness and mental distress had robbed her of this bloom : her skin had a dark unhealthy tint less becoming than absolute paleness, and her eyes were lustreless under their reddened lids ; she was looking her worst then,—positively plain this morning ; and last of all, that obstinate head of hers looked, as Lady Strath said, "as though her hair had been blown about in a strong wind for hours, and then set down before a hot fire to friz ;" figuratively speaking, it was all in turbulent little waves ; in reality, it looked anything but dignified—"a mop in convulsions," as Leigh once wickedly called it, but he was proud of the little brown wig, too.

No, Bab looked quainter than ever in her sadness, with

that childish head of hers and her favourite nun's dress ; even Nigel, blind to defects as most lovers are, wished that she did not look so ill, for his mother's sake. Lady Strath, meanwhile recovering from her little shock of surprise, rose from the sofa to meet her ; her kiss was not very warm, certainly, but neither was it cold ; and she took her hand kindly enough, as she seated her beside her ; but Barbara wanted it for Nigel, and after that she took good care to have it in her own keeping—it would not have pleased her to have sat hand in hand with Lady Strath.

"I do hope that we shall be good friends, Barbara," she said, this slight movement not being lost on her.

"Friends—oh yes, I should say there could be no doubt of that."

"That depends on what you mean by the word. Do you know, my dear child, Nest is going to leave me soon : I shall want you to be my daughter in her stead, Barbara." Barbara coloured painfully, all the more that Nigel was so anxiously watching her.

"I must not say anything that is not quite true. I am my father's daughter ; I shall never be anybody else's, Lady Strath : " then as though ashamed of her coldness, "of course I shall hope to be good to him, and to you too."

"I am sure I hope so, my dear," was the reply, in a very dignified tone. "I don't know how high Nigel stands in your estimation, but at least you have promised to become his wife ; for his sake, then, I trust that you and I will get on well together."

"Of course we shall, Lady Strath."

"He is my only son," she continued, the proud tone breaking a little ; "perhaps we have no right to make idols of our children ; if we do, they are sure to disappoint us. I ought not to say so, you being what you are to him, but he could have married anybody."

"I know I am not worthy of him," was Barbara's sad answer. All through the interview she never raised her voice once above the quiet subdued key in which she had first spoken ; she looked a little model of grave patience, sitting with her hands folded together in her lap, and that touching droop of the lip that one sees in a child ; "indeed, I know that I am not worthy of him, Lady Strath."

Nigel stepped forward, and laid his hand smilingly on her shoulder.

"Hush, dear! What nonsense, mother! I will not have you treat Barbara to a panegyric on my virtues; you will be drawing up a whole list of them presently, and forgetting the crowning honour of the whole."

"What is that, Nie?"

"That Barbara has accepted me;" and as he saw his mother's lip curl involuntarily, he went on half-jestingly, "what would have been the use if all the eligible young ladies in the kingdom would have had me, while Barbara continued to say me nay?"

Lady Strath was only a woman; she looked at Nigel, and then at the demure figure in the grey dress, and then back again at Nigel, as though she almost doubted the evidence of her senses.

"Nie, I do believe you are crazy."

"You have told me that before, *madre mia*," with a mocking bow. "Barbara, what makes you keep your eyes in your lap this morning? I verily believe you have grown afraid of me since last evening; or my mother has mesmerised you. Have you given her Nest's message, mother?"

"No, I forgot. Nest sent you her dear love, Barbara, and I am to give you this note from her: when you read it you will find that she has asked a great favour."

"A favour, Lady Strath?"

"Yes; she wants you to be her bridesmaid. It is to be a very quiet wedding, and indeed you must not refuse," for Barbara's face looked dubious; "Nigel thinks, we all think, that you owe this duty to Nest."

"Very well, Lady Strath."

"Do you mean you will come?"

"Of course I will come if it be my duty, and Nigel wishes it; but I tell you frankly that I would rather not." Then Lady Strath embraced her, and called her a dear child; but her manner was rather forced; she was thinking what the county would say to this public recognition of Barbara as her son's *fiancée*. Still the wedding was a safe matter for discussion, and so Lady Strath had a good deal to say on the subject of the trousseau, and the oddities of that dear good-natured Geoffrey—she was thawing visibly over it; but Barbara only answered in monosyllables, and Nigel seemed "bored." Both felt it a relief when Dr. Heathcote came in, and Nigel was at liberty to invite Bab to a stroll in the garden. The air was reviving, and she followed him willingly; it was pleasant to

get away from Lady Strath at all events, and even Nigel looked a different creature as he threw himself on the grass beside her.

"Well, Barbara," he said, taking her two hands, and stooping to obtain a better view of her face, "I am afraid it has not been very satisfactory on the whole."

She shook her head.

"It is not always very easy to get on with the dear old madre: she has her crotchets, Barbara; and one is, that no one is good enough for this precious son of hers."

"I think she is right, Nigel."

"Oh, you do, do you? I did not expect such a compliment from you, Barbara mia;" but his mischievous glance could not win a smile from her.

"I mean," she answered gravely, "that what she said was perfectly true, and you might have married anybody; and it does seem rather hard of course to her that you should throw away all advantages and choose such an insignificant little creature."

"Hold there, Barbara; those observations are personal, and reflect discredit on my good taste. Insignificant indeed!"

"But, Nigel."

"Well?" pressing her hands tightly.

"I think I am sorry for your mother, she is so disappointed—justly so, I believe; and," rather timidly, "I am sorry for you too."

"I am not to be pitied, I assure you."

"Oh, but you are: you don't think so now of course, but one day you may come to look at it all so differently. Nigel, if you ever get tired of me, if I disappoint you, I mean, and you find out that it is not really Barbara that you love, I hope you will come and tell me so; I shall not hold you to your word."

"You dare to say this to me now!" closing her quickly in his arms.

"Why should I not dare? I am only speaking for your good. Oh," with a little thrill of pain, "I am afraid Leigh is right, after all, when he said I had bewitched you." Nigel's laugh was pleasant to hear.

"You delicious little piece of gravity, did Leigh say that? What a clever fellow! Of course you have: do I not tell you you are perfection in my eyes."

"How I wish you would not talk so, St. Ronans."

"St. Ronans, too! You naughty child, do you know I have a great mind to punish you?"

"I cannot help it," she said pathetically; "if you only knew how I long for the old St. Ronans again. I don't want to hurt you; but," with a little burst, "if you would only not praise me in this dreadful way—if you would talk to me as Bab's master used to talk."

It was comical to see his face.

"You mean that I am not to make love to you, I suppose."

"I don't know what I mean; but, oh, I am so tired, St. Ronans."

"I will not have it, Barbara: Nigel or Nie, if you will. I shall have to impose a forfeit. No, I cannot promise not to make love: do you know, I had such a longing while my mother was prosing, to take you away, and keep you to myself. I wish I could make everybody see you with my eyes."

She smiled faintly, the saddest smile.

"Do you know what I was saying to myself all last night, over and over again—'I am yours, Nigel.' I was half afraid it was a dream after all: I wanted to see and to touch you, to make sure that it was reality."

"Are you sure now?"

"I don't know; there is something uncanny about you, Barbara. Do you remember I used to call you the Brownie? Ah, well, I shall be more assured presently, when I set the seal to my words;" and he took her hand again as he spoke. She looked up at him quickly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and then grew ashamed of her question.

His answer was a silent one.

What! he was gilding her chains already: she must wear the badge of her new slavery. Very pale grew the downcast face as the opals and diamonds shone on the little hand: very gravely, though with a child's simplicity, she yielded to his caress; had he not a right?

Perhaps Nigel saw something in that passive endurance that made his heart ache, despite his happiness, for he presently became almost as quiet as she. He had sworn in his unholy passion that, willingly or unwillingly, she should be his wife; he had her now; was she not beside him, this real flesh-and-blood Barbara? had he not touched them all, the little soft hands, the dark wistful eyes, the brown ripples of hair? was not her voice still sweet in his ears? What did it mean, then, this vague yet ever-increasing conviction that she had escaped

him? that it was the soul that he wanted and loved, the pure heart, the simple stainless affection?

Was it not her wraith after all? Where were the quaint bright looks, the wayward fanciful words, the fitful humours of the Barbara he had wooed? Her gentleness surprised him, her ready obedience touched him with quick pain; he would rather she had scorned his caresses than accepted them with such sadness; never once had the colour deepened in her pale face, never once had the quiet voice relaxed from its monotony. His love-making was distasteful, but she bore it, as she would bear everything; he had reproached her for her want of generosity, and had stimulated her to this sacrifice, tempting her in her hour of weakness, and triumphing through her pain, but already his pleasure grated like ashes between his teeth, his whole soul craved after the only thing she could not give him—the possession of her faithful heart.

Barbara, waking up from a reverie, read the dissatisfaction in his face: she knew that gloomy look well; it always moved her to pity.

“Oh Nigel, why do you look like that? I knew I should not make you happy.”

He turned to her with a sudden fond movement.

“My darling, I beg your pardon; am I neglecting you?”

“No—hush, hush! oh, what was that?” she went on with rapidly whitening lips; “was it my fancy? I thought I heard Norman’s step in the shrubbery.”

“Well, so you did: you need not look so frightened. I think he saw us too; anyhow he passed on quickly. He is grown dreadfully unsociable of late.”

She pressed her face on her hands without speaking.

“I think he might have stopped to have congratulated us, after I took the trouble to write to him too.”

“You wrote to him? you told him about this?” she faltered.

“Of course I did: have you any objection, dear? He is my cousin, you know.”

“No; it is quite right—quite right;” then with a strange quiver of her lips, “Dear Nigel, you must forgive me, if I have not seemed myself this morning.”

“That is the second time, since we have been engaged, that you have asked me to do that,” he said, with a little impatience in his voice.

“Oh, Nigel, are you vexed with me already? Indeed I will

try to be all you wish, if you will only be patient : you must be patient for my sake as well as for your own."

Her gentleness touched him in spite of himself.

"If you will only love me a little," he asked humbly.

"Well, do I not?—oh, a great deal, a great deal more than you know ; but that does not keep us from being unhappy, it seems. If I am hiding anything from you, it is only for your good ;" for her one secret galled and fretted her like a concealed lie. "You must be very patient with me, dear, for sometimes I feel no better than a sick child—oh so very, very tired !" and then, greatly to his surprise, she dropped her head on his arm in an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FAIRY PRINCE.

"He brings me costly treasures,
And pearls to deck my brow ;
The cold world and its pleasures
Are the themes he speaks of now.
But little joy they render,
If they sparkle 'mid my tears ;
Can the heart be won by splendour
That has loved in earlier years ?"

CARPENTER.

THE days went on, bright autumn days, but Barbara did not find her life much easier to her ; every morning when she woke she braced herself up to fresh efforts and fresh trials of patience, taking herself to task for her faint-heartedness, and measuring each duty by her own puny strength ; but when evening came, she always told herself that she had done badly—that she had utterly failed—that Nigel's great love was a reproach to her indifference ; at such times her remorse was lively, and she would make all manner of promises of amendment, and yet when the morrow came there were only new failures.

For she was forming ropes out of sand, and no wonder she found it weary work.

It was not so much that she shrank from the sacrifice that she had made, as that it seemed to crush her ; she was as one who was fettered hand and foot, she could not move freely, her power of volition seemed gone ; if she had any will at all, she

hardly knew it ; all her bright energies languished,—it was as though her individuality had departed with her freedom ; like the half-tamed bird to which Nigel had compared her, she drooped and pined on the giddy perch on which he had placed her, and as yet she knew no sweetness of song in her captivity.

But weary as her daily life was, its bitterest ingredient was Norman's resolute avoidance of her ; she began to crave for his presence with an intensity of longing that was perfectly repellent to her better nature ; and yet, the more she repressed this feeling, the stronger it grew ; she was hungering for a word, for a look, for a touch of his kindly hand : it was not only that life was barren of all joy without him, but that his friendship was a necessity to her ; she wearied after him with a strange persistent longing, all the greater that she was compelled to hide it.

But, argue against it as she would, she could not shut her eyes to the fact that he never crossed her path if he could help it ; indeed, as time went on, his avoidance of her was almost singular : without word or warning, he seemed to have assumed that that last conversation of theirs was to all intents a final one, so completely had he dropped out of their little sphere ; to Barbara it now bore all the solemnity of a farewell,—perhaps he wished her to think so ; and so great at all times was his influence over her, that though she was wearing her heart out, just to exchange a word with him again, she no more thought of breaking down the barrier that he had chosen to put up between them, or of seeking him on some neutral ground of her own devising, than she would have thought of telling out all her pain to her lover.

He would have it so—therefore there was no help for it ; the heavy door that shut out the surgery from Heathcote House was as impassable an obstacle as the sandy deserts of Sahara,—she would as soon have crossed the one as the other. He might as well have been in America as Sunningford, for she never met him : once indeed she nearly came upon him in a lane near St. Ronans, but before she could find out whether he saw her, he had put his horse into a canter, and was out of sight in a minute. Coming out of church also, one rainy Sunday, she saw him just as she was getting into the Straths' carriage ; Nigel called to him gaily to come with them, but he only lifted his hat with a glance that included all the party, and joined Hester. Barbara scarcely spoke a word to any one the remainder of that day. Nor were things much more satisfactory with Mrs. Strath ; on hearing of the engagement, she had written a warm letter to her

nephew, and another to Barbara, full of expressions of affection and kind wishes for their happiness ; but, notwithstanding, Barbara felt herself a little disappointed ; there was kindness, but no approbation ; the whole tone of the letter manifested little pleasure, but a great deal of surprise ; and Barbara also fancied a slight amount of offence was taken, that she had left her so completely in the dark. Barbara's reply was curt, but overflowing with love : she could not go down to Oakleigh Cottage, but she begged Mrs. Strath to come and see her at Heathcote House ; she had underlined the request, urging it very warmly. There was no reply to this ; but a week afterwards Mrs. Strath did come, but only on parish business with Hester.

Barbara was just going to St. Ronans when Mrs. Strath was announced ; but she resolved upon keeping Nigel waiting, and went in at once to receive her with open arms, but her friend had very little to say to her.

"I suppose one ought never to be surprised at anything, Barbara, but I confess I have been utterly astonished ;" and her kiss was a little colder than usual as she said this ; it needed no more to show that Mrs. Strath had small sympathy with Barbara's choice.

Bab hung her head very sadly.

"Everybody is surprised. I do not think that one, even among my own people, think me worthy of him, unless it be Daddy." Her humility, her sadness, could not fail to mollify her friend.

"That was not my meaning, Barbara. I think you quite worthy of my nephew, as far as that goes ; Nigel's poor health is a far greater obstacle in my eyes."

"He is much stronger, Mrs. Strath."

"Perhaps so, my dear. Well, it is done now ; but every one is free to hold their own opinion, and I cannot think you have been wise ; but your father knows best. Everybody, Norman even, treats Nigel as a hypochondriac, but I do not know ; and then neither of them have examined him." She broke off her vague rambling at seeing Barbara's look of alarm.

"What are you talking about, Mrs. Strath ?" she asked with some astonishment.

"Nothing, my dear ; ah, well, sufficient for the day. But if you had asked my opinion, Barbara, which you did not ; but perhaps, after all, I should have done no good : you see, I do not think it quite kind that you have let me be so taken by

surprise. You did not even tell me of it yourself; but I suppose young things like you do not like talking about their feelings; and I am only a cross-grained old woman, my dear. But things have not turned out quite as I wished them;" and then, to Barbara's distress, she wiped a tear or two away.

"Dear Mrs. Strath, are you angry with me? have I disappointed you?"

"Angry, my dear! nay, I have no right, I am sure; I ought to say I am very glad for your sake: such an advantageous match, too."

"Oh! pray don't speak of it like that."

"Why should I not? that is how the world speaks of it. Dear, dear, you will be my niece now: of course it is the best, and all that." But there was a look of trouble in Mrs. Strath's face as she uttered these little commonplaces that sorely perplexed Barbara; she was certainly as affectionate as ever, but her manner was changed.

"I am sorry that I have not your approbation," said Barbara, speaking faintly, as her friend rose to take leave.

"My dear, how you talk! Of course you have it: I think it will be a grand thing for Nigel, your marrying him; you will do him good, and keep him up to his duty."

"I don't feel much like doing any one good," sighed Barbara.

"Oh! you must not say that; it is wrong to depreciate yourself. By the bye, my dear, you do not look quite well; your eyes are harassed and worn. Nigel is rather an excitable lover, I expect, you must keep him quiet; and take my advice, Barbara, do not have a long engagement—a long engagement will wear him to death."

"Is that all you have to say to me, Mrs. Strath?"

"I will keep anything else till I see you next. And oh! I forgot: Norman desired me to say everything kind to you; he is very busy, quite torn to pieces just now, poor boy. Now I must settle my business with Hester. I will not keep you any longer, my dear, or Nigel will never forgive me; there, God bless you! Keep up your looks, for they belong to him now;" and she embraced Barbara again with moist eyes, but still with that dissatisfaction in her voice and manner: the girl looked back at her wistfully, as she went out.

"She is my adopted mother, and I have disappointed her; I disappoint everybody. I wonder if she wanted me for Norman? perhaps she did. But why need she be hurt?—how could I marry him against his will? And then she has never asked me

to the cottage ; I do not believe she wants me, and, if she did, I don't think I could even make up my mind to ask Nigel's leave to go there ; it would not be right—not now, even if he would give me my liberty for a few hours ;” and Bab sighed bitterly as she walked towards the fir-plantation. Perhaps her duty might have seemed easier if Nigel had been a more reasonable lover ; but his constant surveillance fretted her beyond endurance,—it was not too much to say that he could not bear her out of his sight.

Strange as it might appear, that feeling or conviction which first occurred to him when he sat in the garden beside her, on the day of their betrothal, always returned upon him with more or less force when she was absent from him, making him restless and uneasy. When they were together, so great was his affection, that her mere presence filled him with happiness ; she might respond or not to his fondness,—every word, every look of hers, yielded him a certain content. But a few hours of absence seemed to affect him strongly : grave doubts and fantastic terrors, all manner of lover-like bugbears, possessed him ; he would turn over her words in his mind, and pronounce them cold, or they had been not wanting in kindness, but uttered in a weary tone ; she had looked tired or distrait, wanting in animation. At such times the remembrance of her ready obedience in trifles seemed to vex him ; it was too like the obedience of one who has no interest to contest ; he would have given worlds to hear her disagree with him, to see her rebel against some whim of his ; if he could have provoked one of their old arguments, it would have been joy to him,—a frown or two, the quick scornful curl of the lip, would have been better than the listless sweetness of her looks ; how often astray, how lost she had appeared, when he had been talking to her, and he had been angry with her, with a fierce lover-like anger ; and then it had gone to his heart, to hear how she had begged his pardon, as though she were a child, and he her master.

He always conjured up these fancies when alone ; on such occasions he was so gloomy as to affront his mother ; she felt there was no help for it, and that his was the very ecstasy of madness ; she must humour it, she knew. But her jealousy of Barbara was almost a passion ; one could almost believe that these two women, about to be so strangely united, hated each other with as cordial a hatred as was consistent under the circumstances, none the less that Lady Strath hid hers under

honeyed words and profusions of costly gifts, propitiatory to the reigning goddess, while Barbara, on her side, contented herself with the scantest courtesy, considering her relations with Lady Strath as strangely humbling ones, seeing that they obliged her to receive her gifts, and to make no outward show of her indifference.

For the rest, she resigned herself to her position with the best grace she could muster, but she sighed after her lost freedom with a never-ceasing regret. No more strolls in the pine-woods ; since the day she had lain there in her misery she had ceased to haunt them ; she had lost all her desire for country rambles, since she and Ben must not take them alone.

Instead of that, there were long mornings in the studio, where Barbara would gladly have forgotten herself and her sorrow too in her work, if he would have allowed her ; but he was always harassing her with interruptions, coaxing her to leave off painting and attend to him. Her only periods of rest and comfort were during Nest's brief visits ; but Nigel never seemed to encourage them, and Nest had far too great a fellow-feeling to intrude her society on her brother where it was not wanted. Lady Strath had less compunction, and came often ; but her presence only gained black looks from Nigel ; he used to betake himself to his book silently, and leave the burden of conversation on Barbara, listening all the time to every remark that fell from her lips in a half-anxious, half-irritable way that made her nervous. When his mother was gone, he would take her to task for her reserved manners, or her coldness, or her want of response, for which it was not always quite easy for her to excuse herself ; she would make promises to him of doing better the next time, of which promises she always fell lamentably short ; it grieved her to hear his reproaches, knowing them to be true ; it was hard upon him, she felt, idolising his mother as he did, to see this estrangement between them, and yet with two such natures how was an alliance possible ?

She found out, after all, that Nigel was easier to manage when she had him alone ; but the tedium of this perpetual love-making was terrible. A morning of broken work was sure to be followed by an afternoon of lounging in the Heathcote garden ; sometimes she got him to come in and read to her and her sisters as they sat at work, but not often, and then the book was soon discarded : he was in too wiry and restless a state for steady occupation ; he liked the *dolce far niente* better ; and worse still, he wanted Barbara to like it too—

Barbara, who declared that work and freedom were the breath of life to her.

Her days passed more quickly when Nigel taught her to ride; that, in spite of all drawbacks, was delightful to her; at last he had found something about which she might manifest genuine enthusiasm: it was touching to see his happiness when he first discovered this for himself.

Of course, there were no bounds to his generosity. A new horse found its way into the St. Ronans stables—one that a princess might have ridden; and Nigel was at great pains to procure her a habit from London. Norman used to see them riding out together as he initiated the new assistant in his duties; through the low surgery window he could see Nigel mounting her, and taking the little foot in his hand; by and by they would canter past: he would see it all—the pretty bay mare, and the dark blue habit, and the long feather drooping over the felt hat, and just a glow of colour in the pale face as she patted the neck of her new favourite, Ben leaping up open-mouthed at her side. “You may enter Mrs. Deanes’s name again in the ledger, Mr. Johnson; and there is the blister to be sent for Hartstone’s boy directly;” and Norman would put on his gloves in a grave professional manner. Well, he had seen her again; he saw her every day, though she did not know it. He would carry that picture of her through the tedium of a wakeful night. “How brave she looked in her new habit; and with what a pretty colour and smile she had leaned over to speak to Ben: how was he to know that the colour was transient, and that her heart was sinking even now with disappointment, that she had passed the surgery windows and that the shrubs had hidden him from her sight?”

Others besides Norman watched the little cavalcade that left the Doctor’s house daily. Sunningford and Durnford were making themselves very busy with the Heathcotes’ affair; Barbara’s engagement with the rich Mr. Strath spread like wildfire over the place, and there was some truth in the Doctor’s joke, that female curiosity was filling up the gaps in his visiting-list; one or two had already thrown over Murray and gone back to their old friend, and many were the delicious little bits of gossip that these returned prodigals enjoyed in their conversations with the Doctor, and which were of course retailed to the Murrayites over many a maidenly tea-table. The tide of popular favour, always fickle, was already turning in favour of the Heathcotes; and so strong was the benevolence

of present feeling, that several were heard to declare, speaking under their breath, that there was a certain person, not to be mentioned in polite society, who was said to be not quite so black as he was painted; to which they added various shrugs and knowing nods, in which ringlets had a grand play, all going very far to prove that Norman, for whom this flattering comparison was supposed to be drawn, might have ventured somewhere on the strength of his cousinship, if he had not chosen to become every day more surly and unbearable.

Dr. Strath gave a grim laugh when this slight indication of popular opinion reached him; but if Sunningford and Durnford had put themselves in sackcloth and ashes, and eaten their own words in due penance for their slanders, he would have heard them out, and then turned his back upon them with a rough word or two, as he was doing now. One or two backsliders from the paths of integrity had been full of remorse when they heard that they had driven him away, and had come up boldly confessing their transgressions, and with peace-offerings in their hands; but he had received them with that black look that they knew so well, taking their apology haughtily, as though it were his right, but refusing to have anything to do with the peace-offering, declining it, indeed, in words so pungent, so altogether unsavoury to their mental palate, that they had quitted his presence, feeling themselves unable to keep in it any longer, and if not positively hating him, going very near to that Christian frame of disposition.

But, to tell the truth, he was so sick of himself, that he did not care to hide that he despised them heartily, that he was washing his hands of them, shaking off the dust of Sunningford as though it were not worthy of his footsteps; he wanted to rid himself of a place and people that were alike odious to him. He could hardly brook the necessary delays; the days had passed into weeks, and yet he had not gone the whole round of his farewells; he was leaving one or two to the very last—one for which he believed that he should only find time when his horse was brought round to the door.

Sunningford then felt itself rather in the position of an aggrieved penitent in relation with Dr. Strath; he had as much as told them that their sin was of too black a dye to be pardoned; all their humiliation therefore must be reserved for the other doctor, who was much given to receive all such offenders with open arms.

Every one who had a right to call on the Heathcotes, and

very many who had none, left cards, or made good their entrance. There was quite a block of country equipages one afternoon in the narrow lane, and several pairs of eyes, "blue, black, and grey," to stare at poor Bab; a few timid ones contented themselves with a mere inspection and soon went away, but others remained behind to take mental stock, turning Barbara metaphorically inside out in their attempts to find out why Nigel Strath had chosen her.

Of course there were divisions of opinion, those who were the fault-finders of society vowing that there was nothing in her—positively nothing, and that that young Strath must have been crazy to choose such a little nonentity, and others more benevolent and kind-hearted discovering all kinds of ideal beauties—she was not pretty, but she was piquante, original, rather out of the common, there was something distinguished in her grey dress, she had a dimple, bright eyes, etc., the fact being that, with the best possible intentions, they hardly knew what to say. It would have been difficult to decide whether Barbara or Lady Strath suffered most under these inspections: to the latter indeed they were simply unendurable; she was ashamed of Barbara, ashamed of her son's choice, but she bore such shame with the grandeur of a stoic, or rather a woman of the world; she did her best with the scanty materials allotted to her; she could not add to Barbara's stature, or make her grave little face one whit prettier, but she took her dowdiness in hand, resenting it as a personal slight to Nigel; she bought pretty dresses, and had them made up in the newest fashion, and presented them with appropriate ornaments, and she condescended to take her maid into confidence on the subject of Miss Heathcote's hair, beguiling her into her dressing-room on one occasion, and spending the time to such purpose that Nigel hardly recognised the beautiful *crêpé* hair for his Bab's brown furze-bush.

Barbara accepted the dresses and wore them dutifully, but she hated them, she dropped tears of secret vexation and humiliation over the muslin and silk folds; Nigel bought her a rich Genoese velvet one day, Lady Strath had it trimmed with point lace; it suited Bab admirably, and she looked like a little queen in it; she took it almost without a word, and wore it that evening, that he might feast his eyes with his rare gift; but there was a look upon her face all the time as though she were a victim about to be led out to sacrifice, whom they were be-garlanding for their own amusement. Once she would have

revelled in her velvet gown ; now the pomp and weight of it seemed to drag her down, as did the glittering chains, and bracelets, and rings with which he loaded her.

She lost patience at last, and they had a battle-royal over it. Barbara threatened to lay them all away, and take to her grey dress again.

"You loved me when I wore little else," she said to him : "I cannot take any more of yours or your mother's presents ; let me keep them and wear them when I am your wife. It is not fitting for Dr. Heathcote's daughter to wear velvets and jewels. Oh, do be reasonable, Nigel ; if you had any generosity, you would spare me ;" and she actually shed tears of hurt pride as she said this. But Nigel was inexorable.

"It is your own fault that you are not my wife now," he answered her, rather gloomily ; "but I cannot help it, if you are so indifferent to my happiness : your very pride shows you have no love for me, or you would not so scorn my gifts."

"I do not scorn them ; it is very unkind of you to speak so, Nigel ; and my pride is a right and proper pride. It is not because I am going to marry you, that you need heap me with things as though I were your slave, it is treating me as a slave ;" she went on with burning cheeks, on which the tears were already dry, and there was a quick passionate choke in her voice as she answered him ; she looked more like the Barbara of old than she had for a long time.

Her spirit pleased Nigel even though he was determined to have his way ; he was clasping a bracelet on her arm when she had first remonstrated, and now he toyed lightly with the pendant as he answered her.

"I think it is I who am the slave, Barbara ; I wonder what lover would bear what I do daily, I put my neck under your little foot, and you reward me by trampling on my tenderest feelings. I verily believe if I were to leave you to yourself, you would never speak to me."

"For shame, Nigel !"

"Oh, for shame, is it. I do think I have linked my heart to an ice maiden, my love cannot warm you, I do not know whether my caresses or my gifts are least tolerable."

"Nigel ! Nigel !"

"And there you sit as demure and grave as a little Portia ; you are shocked now, you are always in judgment against me. What have I said now to offend you ?"

"If you would only be reasonable !" she sighed.

"Well, am I not? look here, Barbara, my own darling, I hate to see you cry; if you would let me, I would kiss every tear away,—perhaps if I did, they would not be so ready to come; why do you look so restless?"

"If you would only let me go on with my work?" she implored.

"Let you! not a bit of it! I do not think I shall set you free for the whole morning as a punishment for your ingratitude; don't you feel what a bad ungrateful child you have been?"

"I don't know, I daresay I have," she answered wearily.

"Well, are you going to promise not to do so any more; do you know you have hurt me very badly, Barbara?"

"I did not mean to do that," she said penitently, as her eye fell on the brilliants.

"I daresay not! you were only so full of your wicked little pride; don't be proud with me any more, Barbara, I cannot bear it; tell me you will never refuse my gifts again!"

"Oh, Nigel! I never dreamt of refusing your beautiful present; I only begged you, as I do still, not to give me any more."

"Oh, we shall see about that," he answered wilfully; and then he let her go on with her work; but Barbara knew that it was a defeat, as far as she was concerned; she was only too sure of it a few days afterwards, when he told her very coolly that his mother would furnish her trousseau; it was evident from his manner that he expected another scene, and was rather prepared to enjoy it; but Barbara disappointed him, she took it very quietly, having made up her mind that it was her duty to submit for her father's sake, but her changing colour showed what it cost her.

She had found out too, by this time, that Nigel was determined to have his way in everything; if they were to enjoy anything like a moderate amount of peace, her will must yield to his; she had gained one victory in the early days of their engagement, and she found she must make the most of her triumph, for no other would be hers.

She had insisted on a postponement of their marriage, and had carried her point too.

They had not been engaged a week, and she was still much shaken in spirits, and with unequal nerves; in a state, indeed, in which any older and more experienced man than Nigel would

have applied himself to cheer and soothe her back to at least tranquillity, instead of fretting and exhausting her overtaken feelings till she was on the verge of fever; it was against all reason, then, and certainly against generosity, knowing on what plea she had suffered herself to be engaged to him, that he should press for an immediate marriage with her, on the excuse that a warmer climate suited his health; he actually wanted her to marry him before the autumn was out, that they might winter in Italy.

The girl turned as white as a sheet when this proposition was made to her, and for the first time in her life, went into real hysterics; Nigel was greatly alarmed of course, and only thought of soothing her agitation, but as soon as she had recovered, he enlisted the Doctor's sympathies on his side, and begged him to use his influence with Barbara.

"It is very much like asking me to cut my own throat, Nigel," said the doctor ruefully. "I cannot press the child into a sudden marriage against her will, but I will do what I can," and then he went off exhorting him to patience. He was all on Nigel's side when he went up to her room, but before he had been many minutes with her she had twisted him round: the state of wretchedness in which he found her would have gone to any father's heart.

"Come, come, this will never do, Barbara," he said very decidedly, as he felt her dry fevered hand, "we must send the young Prince about his business if he is going to worry you like this," and then he sat down on the bed and took her in his arms, and spoke to her in his grave wise way till she had swallowed down her bitter sobs and lay as quiet on his breast as though she was the little child he had often hushed to sleep.

"Now what is it all about, Barbara? have you got tired of your lover, my dear?"

"No, oh no," she gasped out, with a secret conviction that she was not speaking the truth; "but, Daddy," clinging to him, "don't let him marry me yet, and take me away from you to that dreadful Italy."

"You shall not marry him at all if you do not wish it," returned the doctor with a twinge of pity for his motherless girl; "you are not to marry him only for our good, remember that, Barbara."

"No, of course not," she replied, very much alarmed lest he should have discovered her secret; "I am not finding fault

with Nigel for his own sake ; he is too good to me, Daddy, but, oh, do ask him to be patient ?"

"He must be patient, my Barbara," he returned, much displeased, "I will not have any child of mine harassed like this."

"He did not mean to harass me," she exclaimed eagerly, "it was only his love, I know, but I could not help my stupidity ; I wish he were not quite so fond of me, Daddy, that's all."

"And what am I to tell him, you vain little puss," returned her father, half in earnest, but still holding her tightly.

Barbara thought a moment, her forehead puckered with pain.

"You must ask him to be patient, dear father ; tell him that I am not very strong just now, and not fit to cope with such thoughts ; let him leave me this winter in peace ; in the spring, if he likes, I will marry him."

"Come, that's reasonable, he must agree to that," said Dr. Heathcote ; and then he went down to the impetuous lover ; he had some trouble with him, however, but in the end he was forced to yield. But Barbara was obliged, as we have said, to make the most of this victory ; in every other point she found he was too much for her, as in the case of the velvet and jewels, and before long she found that he had another and scarcely less grave demand to make, which would cost her some trouble to refuse, and in which it would be extremely doubtful whether his will would not prevail in the end.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"WHEN WE TWO PARTED."

"Though far and fast the rapid moments run,
Thy bosom heaveth not, thine eyes are clear.
Silent, perhaps a little sad at heart
She is. I am her friend, and I depart."

JEAN INGELOW.

It was the day fixed for Dr. Strath's departure from Sunningford, when Barbara went down as usual to St. Ronans.

Norman had kept his plans so close that only his mother was aware that it was his intention to leave that night. Even Dr. Heathcote was ignorant of the precise day, not knowing

indeed until that very morning that his partner and he were having their last ride together. Barbara therefore was quite unaware of the pain that that day had in store for her, her heart was even a little less heavy than usual as the great gates swung back on her, bringing a plentiful rain of crimson and yellow leaves in noiseless patter on her head ; and she crossed the lawn more quickly than was her wont, in order to gain the side entrance to the studio ; she was wanting to finish a piece of work in which she was much interested, and as she was a little before her time hoped to find the studio unoccupied.

The Fates were propitious for once, no Nigel was there, only plenty of cool mellow light and Barbara's unfinished canvas temptingly displayed on her easel ; she took off her hat and cloak and was soon deep in her work ; for with all her miseries Bab was too true an artist not to feel her heart glow with something like happiness when the palette was in her hand ; when well into her subject she almost forgot her troubles, though they were pretty sure to come back with the first tone of Nigel's voice.

One hour passed and then two, and still she worked on, revelling in her freedom and keenly alive to the sweetness of the flowers with which Nest always dressed her brother's room, taking now and then refreshing peeps at the cool ferns, and the long shady lawn sloping down to the shining water, or pausing to listen to some bird singing in the woods ; her work was delicious, and she was almost smiling over a bit of delicate colouring, when Nigel's light footsteps came behind her and his hands on her shoulder made her turn round to greet him.

He enjoyed her start, and above all the glimpse of the smile he had caught.

"My pupil has been working hard, I see, while her master has been playing truant ; your piece is getting on famously, Barbarina, mia ; it will be your best."

"I think it will be," she returned with a little play of dimples at his praise ; "are not the old woman's wrinkles famous ?" and she was stretching out her hand for her palette again, but he stopped her.

"That will do for to-day, I want to talk to you, Barbara." The dimples went in again quickly.

"Only five minutes more," she pleaded earnestly, "do let me finish that bit of the red cloak, Nigel ; it will only take me five minutes, indeed it will."

"Very well, have your own way," he answered good-

humouredly, and he leant over her chair, and watched her very patiently for him, while the five minutes doubled and trebled themselves; nay, when she had finished, he even took the trouble to touch up her work, pointing out a defect here, and an oversight there, in his old way; praising the whole, too, in no measured terms, and vowing that one of her pictures should be exhibited before the next year was out; Barbara could almost have believed it was her own St. Ronans come back.

"Well, can you listen to me now?" he asked at last, as she took a lingering look at her canvas, and as she nodded in assent, he drew a chair towards him and leant over it facing her.

"Don't you wonder what has become of me all this time?" he began; "why, I've been positively two hours away from you."

"I thought it a long time," she observed quietly.

"Did you? well, you did not take my absence much to heart it seems, though I was fussing and fretting to get back to you. My mother decoyed me into her dressing-room, and there was no getting away; have you heard of this new plan of hers?" and as Barbara looked up in surprise, "I mean about our spending the winter in London."

"She has not spoken to me about it," she returned quickly.

"No! Well, I suppose she has left it for me, then; and now I want to know your opinion. I have been thinking over it all this while, and I do feel that I ought not to oppose her."

"Of course you ought not to oppose her; is that what you wanted me to say?"

"Partly, but, forgive me if I touch on a delicate subject. You know, Barbara, that this," hesitating, "this engagement of mine is not quite according to her wish; in fact she would have liked me to look higher."

"Of course she would. You need not be afraid of saying this to me, Nigel."

"No, no; I am assured of your good sense, and after all you understand my mother though you disagree with her. I wish you two could be fonder of each other, but I suppose it will come in time. I do not know how things look to you, Barbara, but take it all in all, I think she is doing well by us; if you were a daughter-in-law of her own selection she could not treat you better in any respect."

"I am not finding fault with your mother," returned Barbara, in a low voice.

"No, of course you are not. I am preaching now for my

own benefit as well as yours. What I feel is, that she has given in to us in such an important matter, that I do not think it worth while for us to cross her in trifles."

"For you, I suppose you mean?"

"And you, too," he returned, with a slight frown. "I hope you do not wish to divide our interests. I do say that she has swallowed a very bitter pill for our sakes, in seeing me refuse a grand match; and I must say, also, that we ought to make all such swallowing as palatable as possible."

"Perhaps so, but I do not see what I have to do with it at present."

"You will see soon enough," he answered impatiently. "I don't think you are much disposed to meet my ideas this morning. The fact is the madre has set her heart on wintering in London, and I see nothing to be gained by opposing her."

"Why does she wish it? It is not the season for London, is it, Nigel?"

"Of course not, child; what a question, and what an unfashionable little heathen you must be to ask it; pray keep such ignorance for me in future. I would not like it to reach my mother's ears."

"I am always displeasing you with my ignorance," she answered humbly; on which he descended from his high perch at once, and asked her what his grand London friends would think of such a country-bred little rustic.

"They will think as every one else does, that you have very bad taste, that is, if they ever have the opportunity of seeing me;" at which speech Nigel shot a strange look at her, and went hurriedly on.

"Of course this whim of the madre has nothing to do with fashion—the truth is, some Canada friends of hers are obliged to spend the winter in London, in order that an invalid son may have the benefit of London physicians. I think the poor fellow has to undergo some operation or other, and Colonel Ford has taken a house in Portman Square, and now they want my mother to come next door to them."

"Does she wish it very much, too?"

"Wish it? You should hear her, she is wild to go. You see this Mrs. Ford is a great crony of hers, and now the poor thing is in trouble and wants her so. The madre actually cried about it."

"I think you ought to go," observed Barbara gravely.

"That is what I say, but I am glad you endorse my

opinion. After all, Sunningford must be rather dull in the winter."

"It is not only that, but I think you ought not to disappoint your mother, she is so devoted to you. Of course I shall be sorry to lose you, Nigel, but the winter will soon pass, and it is better to do one's duty."

Nigel's face was a study.

"Did I hear you right, Barbara? Surely you do not suppose that I have any intention of going to London alone."

"Alone, no. I thought you said your mother wished to go?" she returned, rather bewildered.

"My mother! What would be the good of a dozen mothers if I were to leave you behind? Of course I shall stay at home if I cannot take you, Barbara."

Now it was Barbara's turn to look discomfited.

"To take me, Nigel?"

"Take you? Yes, of course. It is not Italy remember, and I do not ask you to marry me just yet, so you need not look so frightened. My mother may invite you to her house as her guest, I suppose. Anyhow, I am pretty sure of this, that London won't hold me if you are to be in Sunningford."

"Then I am afraid you must remain at home," she returned very decidedly.

"But I cannot, I have given my word, would you have me break my word, Barbara? How are you ever to win my mother's affection if you oppose her in a plan on which she has set her heart? and if you do not go there will be an end of the whole thing, and she will never forgive us."

"She will have to forgive us; but indeed, Nigel, you ought not to break your word. I think you owe this sacrifice to Lady Strath."

"Sacrifice, nonsense," he exclaimed angrily; "you are not going to put me off like that. Of course I must go, and you must go with me."

"Nigel, you are asking too much; I cannot leave my father."

"Now you are going to be obstinate and give me trouble. I do think you are the hardest girl that any lover had to deal with; you might as well tell me at once that you will have nothing more to do with me."

"That would be worse than foolish, and wicked into the bargain. You know that I try all day long to please you and you only, but I cannot please you in this."

"Why not? if I may ask."

"Because you are exacting from me a most unreasonable sacrifice—the sacrifice of my last winter at home; why, I might as well marry you at once, and go to Italy, if I have to spend all those months in London."

"I wish you would marry me, you are harassing me to death. I shall never feel I have you safe till you are my wife."

"I have done nothing to deserve such a doubt," she returned, with sufficient haughtiness. He was trying her patience too far.

"There, now I have roused you in earnest—well, anything is better than that cold gentleness with which you generally answer me. I do not mind your frown one bit—not a bit. I say I wish you would marry me."

"Nigel, that is not the question."

"I know it is not, but what is the use of talking? I verily believe that you would not mind one bit if I went away to London all those months and left you."

"I am sorry if that be your opinion, but I cannot help it."

"Good heavens! Would any one believe how she treats me? Barbara, I wish I knew how to make you feel ashamed of yourself."

"I am often very much ashamed of myself, but not now; I am only obeying a plain duty in declining to leave my father."

"You had better ask him if he regards it in that light. I am inclined to think he might differ from you."

"Nigel, have you been to him? is that what has taken you so long?"

"Of course I have been to him," he returned, braving her reproachful look. "I hope I know my duty as well as you do yours, Barbara; I thought it right to consult him before I ventured on such a proposition to you."

"Well?" she inquired doubtfully.

"You want to know his opinion? well, he was very dubious as to how you would take it, he knew what an obstinate little creature you were to manage. I begin to pity your belongings, Barbara."

"He thought I should not like it."

"He was afraid you would not; by the bye, he forbade me to use any persuasions; but you may set your mind at rest as to what he thinks of it, his opinion is that two or three months in London would do you a great deal of good."

"I don't believe it, Daddy never said that."

"My dear Barbara!"

"I beg your pardon, Nigel, but I think you have mistaken him."

"I think you have need to beg my pardon; you are using me strangely this morning; am I to repeat the rest of your father's speech or not?"

"If you please," she repeated humbly.

"It is as you please, Barbara," he remarked pointedly; "well, he said that he was very much distressed at the alteration in your looks, that you were evidently far from well, and that my mother was right in saying the change would do you good; Leigh was just settling in his new home, and it would be pleasant for you to be near him; society would be just the thing for you, and it would be a grand opportunity for the madre to get your trousseau; of course he would be sorry to part from you for so long, but no doubt he would be able to run up once or twice to see you and Leigh; that is all that I believe he said, Barbara."

She made no answer, but the harassed over-strained look had come back to her face.

"You did not mean to doubt my word, dearest, I am sure?"

"No, oh no; I am sorry I spoke so hastily."

"So you see that he is quite on my side!"

"Yes, I see that, and am grieved that such is the case, it makes it so much more difficult for me."

"There is no difficulty at all, the thing lies in a nutshell; you will please us all and go."

"I cannot."

"Barbara!"

"Oh, don't press me; I say I cannot. I am very, very sorry, Nigel, I would do almost anything for you but this; but I cannot give up my last winter at home; you should not ask it."

His only answer was to walk away from her in silence, and take up his book; poor Barbara had to settle herself to her work again with what spirit she might; but her efforts were fruitless, her zest gone; after half an hour's dull labour, she put away her brushes, and made preparations to go home. She had to come again to dinner in the evening, and then, doubtless, the subject would be renewed; she might as well go and talk her father over on her side, for she was determined that

no anger on Nigel's part should be allowed to influence her ; it was an unreasonable exaction, as she had told him, and she would not yield a jot.

So she thought as she put on her hat, and then she went across to him.

"I am going home now, Nigel."

"So I see," he returned somewhat churlishly, and not looking up from his book ; "as things are, I suppose I had better not come with you to the gate?"

"I do not know what you mean by 'things,' but I certainly do not wish you to stand on ceremony with me."

Then he rose, and put open the door for her.

"I am coming to dinner this evening," she said, still hesitating, and hardly daring to offer her hand.

"That is as you please, my mother will excuse you, I dare say ; for myself, I may say that it is of very little moment to me whether you come or not, unless you have changed your mind."

Then she shook her head, marvelling at his ungraciousness, and went slowly down the lawn ; never yet had he suffered her to go down to the gate unescorted, and now he had not even bade her good-bye ; never before had they so nearly approached a quarrel ; he was almost too agitated to speak to her, she saw that, and though he had made that excuse for his churlishness, she knew that the real reason was that his pain was on him, his lips had that darkness about them which always indicated a strong state of excitement ; she had half a mind to turn back and say a soothing word to him, only that she knew it would be no good, and so she went sadly towards home.

She came upon her father just dismounting from his horse, he was in an evident hurry to have his dinner and be off again, but at her first word he consented to take a turn in the shrubberies, and listened patiently enough to all she had to say ; but when it came to his turn to speak, he told her decidedly that he thought she ought to make up her mind to go.

"I hope you know that I am not speaking for myself, Barbara," he said, "I can ill afford to spare you, my dear ; but the lad has been telling me all his difficulties, and how his mother's heart is set upon it, and upon my word, I don't see how you are to refuse him."

"But, Daddy, I might as well have married him at once, as he wished me."

"Well, I don't see that, dear, you wanted a little more breathing time, and very properly so too; but this is only a pleasant visit of a month or two, he has promised you shall be back by the end of February."

"And I am to marry him at the end of April?"

"Well, of course you are; there's a pretty face for Nigel to see. I can't quite take your side in this, Barbara; I don't deny but that it is a great disappointment not to have you for your last winter at home; but as you are to live at least half the year at St. Ronans, we may think ourselves lucky on the whole; you see, if Nigel were an ordinary lover I would not dream of influencing you, he might take his chance like the rest; but I do feel, Barbara, as though we owe him more than we shall ever repay, and we can only look to you to cancel the debt."

"I see what you mean, Daddy."

"Of course you do. I am afraid the poor boy has been wounded; well, we won't talk of it any more just now, think over it this afternoon, and let me know at tea-time at what conclusion you have arrived."

"I shall be at St. Ronans before then."

"What! are you dining there? well, tell him then. I know very well what your answer will be," and then he kissed her, and sent her on to the house to hasten the dinner. She had no appetite for it, however, and refused to sit down, and shut herself up in her den instead, to ruminate over her father's words.

She was in a dilemma certainly, even her father was against her, he had bidden her reconsider her objections, and had told her plainly that he knew well what her answer would be; and yet when the time came for her to dress for her evening visit to St. Ronans her mind was still in the same tumult of indecision and trouble, her only clear thought being that in this matter Nigel was certainly using her very ill.

She had some intention of staying at home, and sending back word, when the carriage came, that she was tired or unwell, but Nigel would see through her pitiful excuse at once, and would most likely come after her; then she was at some pains to adorn herself and put on her velvet dress to propitiate him; telling herself all the time that her efforts would be fruitless; he would, in all probability, receive her gloomily, and humiliate her before them all by his silence and haughtiness of bearing; but the moment they were alone, so overwhelming her

with his anger and love that there would be no peace for her but in yielding to his will.

She had almost made up her mind that she would stay at home after all, when Connie burst into the room.

"Barbara, Norman wants to speak to you in the surgery."

Barbara was clasping a bracelet, as Connie spoke, now it dropped to her feet, and she stooped to pick it up; perhaps it was the exertion that made her forehead so scarlet.

"To speak to me, are you sure, Connie?"

"Sure, of course I am, he wants to bid you good-bye, he has been in the drawing-room ever so long with Hester and me; and nobody knew what had become of you, and now he can't wait any longer; do be quick and run down, Barbara, he says he has not ten minutes to spare."

But Barbara did not hurry; perhaps she could not.

"Did you say he was going away, Connie?" she asked faintly.

"Going away; of course he is, everybody knows that, I should think, only you are so ridiculously taken up with the Fairy Prince that you never hear anything; he has altered his mind, and means to go up to London by the night mail, I believe; now pray, Barbara, do not keep him any longer waiting."

"No, no, in the surgery, I think you said," and then she went down; she stumbled on the first step, and had to hold on by the balustrade, her knees trembled so, and on the door-mat she positively stood still a moment to take breath; it had come to that then, that he was going to bid her good-bye, that after all these weeks of silent avoidance of her, he was summoning her into his presence at the eleventh hour, the very last ten minutes he had to spare; and fool that she was, the thought of seeing his face again was making her tremble all over.

The days were drawing in fast now, but there was plenty of light from the low surgery windows, in spite of the shades. Dr. Strath was writing at a table under the farthest window, the very one which the little cavalcade had so often passed. He rose at once on her entrance, and shook hands almost as though they had met yesterday.

"I am sorry to have troubled you to come down here, but I have been waiting some time in the drawing-room to bid you good-bye, and my minutes are numbered just now;" and as he said this, he began coolly to adjust his papers, laying aside some, and tearing up others as though a pressure of business were on

him, and he had no leisure for such poor things as leave-takings; so at least Barbara thought as she stood silently by the table with downcast eyes, trying hard not to tremble; how could she know what keen glances were bent on her from under the rugged brows, as the waste-paper basket filled under his nervous fingers?

Could there have been a sorer, a more maddening sight to him, than Barbara standing there in her velvet dress? how well those rich grave folds suited her, never had he seen her look so piquante, and so quaintly lovely in his eyes; how fair the rounded white arms were under those lace ruffles, and the small full throat; how brave she looked decked in her lover's gifts, and adorned so tastefully by his hand. His heart was full of passion and anger as he looked at her; Barbara had not been wrong in thinking he had misunderstood her, he was misunderstanding her to the last, most bitterly; the tidings of her engagement to Nigel had been such a death-blow to him that it was doubtful whether he would ever recover from it; he had lost his faith in her; if she were not marrying Nigel for his money, or in fickleness, she was doing it at least out of revenge for what he had told her. Good heavens! she could see his trouble, she could let him tell her in vague words that he had loved her, and then turn round before his very eyes and engage herself to Nigel, and within a few days too. Even if she preferred him, might she not have waited a little? if his Barbara could act like this, could he ever trust woman again? Yes, so rigidly stern was the man's nature, that if she had given up Nigel that instant, and had thrown herself into his arms and prayed him not to leave her, he would have rebuked her fickleness with a severity of words that would have scared her, exacting from her a term of years as the least proof of her repentance; and only then condescending to take her into his heart and show her the enduring greatness of his love. And so there was the bitterness of anger disguised beneath his silence as he watched her under his bent brows; while Barbara, shrinking from his manner and hardly daring to lift her eyes to his, was only remembering with a woman's unreasoning tenderness that he was her dearest, dearest friend, and that he was going to leave her.

The papers were put aside at last, and then he looked at his watch; the movement terrified her into speech.

“Are you really going to-morrow, Norman?” she stammered.

“No, to-night, I take the mail train to London; by this

time to-morrow we shall be at Southampton, and weighing anchor, I hope."

Bab shivered. "We, do you mean your mother, Norman?"

"My mother, of course not, what an idea," and he positively laughed that harsh laugh of his; "a woman of her age cannot rough it as a strong man can; no, Fred Lisle and I start together, and she will join us as soon as we have a comfortable home for her."

"It is very hard for her—leaving you, I mean."

"It is not desirable, but it is the best arrangement that could be made under the circumstances; it might be dull for her perhaps if she were going to remain in Sunningford; but she has accepted an invitation from an old friend in Derbyshire, and there I think she will be tolerably comfortable."

"I am sure I hope so; and where do you think of settling, Norman?" She verily believed that her questions and his answers belonged to some dream.

"In New York, or rather the suburbs," he returned briefly.

"In New York, that is a very, very long way off, nearly the other end of the world, is it not?"

"Not quite, Barbara."

"Ah, well, I hope you will be happy; I do pray that you may be very, very happy, Norman."

"Oh, as to that, I don't quite believe in happiness; you may wish me success if you will, we have a pretty certain prospect of that, I think."

"I am glad to hear it," she responded almost inaudibly.

"Well, a man must eat to live, of course I shall rejoice in success for my mother's sake; Fred is anxious to take a wife over, and so he is likely to work hard, but I must not stand talking any more, Barbara."

"Oh, must you go?" the words would come out in spite of herself.

"I have exceeded my time, now," he said, again looking at his watch; "I never see the use of prolonged leave-takings, I don't think the word good-bye is such a pleasant one that we should linger over it."

"I think it is the bitterest word in the whole language, Norman."

"Well, so do I; I would as lief cut my throat, as say it to some people," and then he took hold of her hand, squeezing it hard; perhaps the innocent sorrow in her eyes touched him;

perhaps in that moment of parting, love over-balanced anger, but certainly his tone was gentle, whatever his words might be.

But the little hand lay lifeless in his grasp ; how was she to tell him that this was the bitterness of death to her ?

"There, it must be said—good-bye, God bless you, Barbara ;" he pressed her hand almost convulsively for a moment, but he could take no kiss from Nigel's *fiancée*, though this parting might be for life ; it would not have been in accordance with his stoicism. "Barbara, I do hope also that you may be happy ;" and then he left her and went out into the air, leaving her voiceless and dumb with misery. What, he had gone, and she had not spoken to him, she had not even returned his warm pressure. "Norman, Norman," oh this was indeed worse than death, worse than any death that she had ever heard of, that he should go away and leave her like this.

But she must not stand there brooding over her unutterable pain, she must put it away now ; surely the nights and the days would be long enough ; there were the carriage wheels coming up the lane ; she took up her cloak and threw it over her, and went up into the hall. Connie was hovering about as usual, putting in fussy little touches to her dress, and giving vent every now and then to her rapturous admiration. Barbara thanked her mechanically and then stepped into the carriage ; the door was closed on her, the fat bay horses trotted down the lane, two or three round-eyed children nutting in the hedges gazed open-mouthed at the powdered footman and the grave little lady that sat inside ; Barbara looked out at them and nodded, she noticed that one of the boys had torn his pinafore, and wondered if his mother would mend it, and then she looked up at the quiet autumn sky, with just a star or two twinkling in the blueness, and thought it strange that she should feel so giddy. "Do people feel giddy when their hearts are broken," thought the poor child, "as mine is broken—as mine is surely broken." And then it came into her mind that she might as well go to London now, anything would be better than Sunningford—Sahara, or the Rocky Mountains, or even Ebal, the Mount of Cursing, anything would be better than this little green nest of a place ; and the grand house in Portman Square looked delightful under this comparison.

There was not a tinge of colour in her face when she entered the St. Ronans' drawing-room, but Nigel was not there to notice it. Lady Strath was fanning herself on a couch, and looking like a silken spread-eagle as usual, and Sir Geoffrey was

on the opposite couch whispering nothings into Nest's ears in a very loud voice. Nigel did not make his appearance till they were seated at the table, and then slipped into his place by Barbara with a muttered apology about "a headache;" he shook hands with Sir Geoffrey, addressing him formally, but a glance and bow were all he vouchsafed Barbara; he looked both ill and ill at ease, in one of his worst moods apparently, and all dinner time his neglect of her was so pointed that of course every one remarked it.

Barbara saw they were all looking at them, and that it was clearly understood that they had had some quarrel. Lady Strath frowned, and did not condescend to her usual graciousness with her, and Nest sidled up closer to her lover with a little fond whisper, which was speedily translated for everybody's benefit in Geoffrey's loud voice, dropped, as he imagined, into an affectionate lowness of tone.

"Of course we shall never quarrel, my little lady; why that would be a good joke, I could not fancy you looking sulky, Nest, like those two opposite——" here a secret pinch from Nest, a most extreme proceeding for her certainly, but to which she was reduced in her distress, silenced him; Nigel glared across at him, but Barbara was too utterly wretched to notice the *gaucherie*: it was rather a comfort to her to be allowed to sit silent, for every word seemed to come with such difficulty through her closed teeth; Nigel never noticed that she did not eat, or that there was anything much amiss with her, he was nursing up his own wrath and grievance, and at such times his blindness was excessive.

It was a most uncomfortable dinner, and even Nest was relieved when her mother gave the signal for their rising. Barbara turned round to see if Nigel were following her as usual, but he had gone back to his seat, and she heard him say to Geoffrey that he was going to have a cigarette on the terrace.

"Will you join me Geoff, old fellow?" but Geoffrey laughingly declined, he had to look over some house plans with Nest.

Lady Strath seated herself on the couch with her most forbidding aspect, waiting for Barbara to join her, but Barbara had no such intention.

"If you will excuse me, Lady Strath," she said, "I think I will go out to Nigel on the terrace."

"Very well, you can do just as you like, of course, but I think you would be wiser to persuade him to come in, these

autumn dews are very bad for him, and he has had one of his attacks to-day," and she looked at Barbara meaningly.

Barbara understood the reproach.

"You think I have been hard on him and made him ill," she replied quietly, as though Lady Strath had spoken and not looked her thoughts. "Well, I must undo my mischief, that is all; I am going out to tell him now that I will accompany you to London."

All Lady Strath's vexed dignity vanished in a moment, for she embraced her and called her a dear child in her old way, and with her usual sweetness; and she even rung for her maid to bring down her own ermine cloak, that Miss Heathcote might not take cold on the terrace.

Barbara did not feel much like taking cold in the dry fever that was on her, but she submitted to be wrapped in the regal garment, and then went out into the starlight; there was very little light beyond the drawing-room windows, but at the darkest end of the terrace she could see the tiny red glow of Nigel's cigarette; she made towards it at once, but she supposed it was the darkness that made her walk so unsteadily.

"Nigel, your mother says you ought to come in;" certainly her voice had a strange indistinctness to-night.

"She has sent a wrong messenger then, I am not coming in at present, thank you."

"That is wrong, and when she says you are ill too; how fearfully angry you must be with me to-night."

He seemed inclined to make a passionate reply, but checked himself.

"You are—are you not, Nigel?"

"I am more hurt than angry, Barbara."

"Ah, that is worse; well, you need not be either, I have changed my mind about going to London."

"You have, Barbara?" in an incredulous tone.

"Yes, I will go now if you will take me;" then he dropped his cigarette and closed her suddenly in his arms.

"My darling—my own darling!"

"Yes, you may call me that or anything you will, but——" laying her head heavily on his shoulder, "Nigel, I feel almost as though I should die to-night."

"Why, what ails you, my little love?"

"Oh, such an ill-feeling—such sickness—such deadly weariness, I suppose you are holding me, but I don't know," then he turned her face towards him in alarm.

"Hush, don't talk, dear, it is a little faintness I suppose; you have been over-strained to-day," and then he guided her gently towards the open window, and had her on the couch almost before any one saw them, laying the cloak over her and shielding her carefully from observation.

His mother came hurriedly up, but he put her aside.

"A little giddiness; you may give me a glass of wine if you will, but leave her to me;" and as she obeyed him he sat down in the arm-chair beside her, holding her hand, but perfectly silent, only giving her the wine when it was brought, and settling the pillows to her head, but not permitting Nest to come near or assist him.

"You must lie still, like a good child," he said, when she had taken the wine at his bidding. "I have sent a message to your father to say that you are not coming home to-night, and the madre is preparing a room for you, so you may just shut your eyes and make yourself comfortable." Barbara gave a little languid smile of assent. She knew that it was not faintness, but mental anguish that oppressed her and made her giddy; but the rest and quiet did her good. It was a new thing to be so shielded by Nigel, his very remorse was making him thus tender over her. He sat patiently for more than an hour by her side, scarcely making his presence known; only when Geoffrey was gone, and the room empty a minute, he asked if she thought she could walk upstairs.

"I wish I could carry you," he said, stooping over her; "you are so little and light, that I am sure it would not hurt me to try," but Barbara shook her head with a faint smile.

"You are certain you are better," he said, still lingering beside her.

"Oh yes, much better," she answered. "You have been so good to me, Nigel," and as he still bent over her, she suddenly put up her two hands round his neck and kissed him.

It was only an involuntary expression of her gratitude; but she had never ventured on even the slightest caress till then, and Nigel's heart beat almost to suffocation with joyful surprise.

But if he had known! Ah, if he had only known!

CHAPTER XL.

THE DARK ANGEL.

"Spare me the past—for see, she cannot harm you,
 She lies so white and cold, wrapped in her shroud,
 All, all my own ; and trust me, I will hide her
 Within my soul, nor speak to her aloud."

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTOR.

"Up above the thoughts that know not anguish,
 Tender care, sweet love for us below,
 Noble pity, free from anxious terror,
 Larger love without a touch of woe.

"Up above a crowned and happy spirit,
 Like an infant in the eternal years,
 Who shall grow in love and light for ever
 Ordered in his place among his peers."

VERY REV. W. ALEXANDER.

"And when you see fair hair be pitiful."

GEORGE ELIOT.

OF course Barbara kept her word and went to London ; about three weeks after Norman had left Sunningford, and the very next day after that in which Nest had become Lady Hunsden, the Strath carriage conveyed Barbara and her father to the Durnford station, where they found Nigel and his mother waiting for them in the midst of a formidable array of servants and luggage.

It is an old proverb—and one that Bunyan has among many such sayings—that "Heaven gives nuts to those who have no teeth." Barbara was soon to discover the truth of this saying when she found herself in the stately mansion in Portman Square.

A year ago, a few months even, and she would have revelled in such gorgeous surroundings—as well as in the purple and fine linen which now appertained to her—when she would have borne herself like a little queen, seeing herself so fêted and caressed. Had ever any little rustic so chivalrous a lover as Nigel ? was he not always beside her to minister to her wishes ? were there any limits to Lady Strath's condescension ? had she not the handsomest apartments allotted to her, apartments which a countess had inhabited, beside the assistance of

her ladyship's own maid, and was she not surrounded by everything in which her soul delighted, seeing that in her secret heart she had ever loved the pomp and vanities of this world ; and did these things make her one whit the happier, any more than the gilding of his cage pleases the imprisoned lark ? No !

It was the fairy story carried out without its enchantment. Day after day Bab saw her little person reflected in the great shining mirrors, her feet buried themselves in carpets as thick and soft as moss : the great bed in which she slept had hangings of purple silk. Bab used to look up and wonder at the painted Cupids, she thought them singular specimens of art ; the lurking shadows from the great wardrobe made her tremble and shrink ; she would glide about the grand suite of rooms, among the pillars and statues, like a bright-eyed mouse, in her velvet dress—somehow the dazzling silks and gaily painted muslins never seemed to become her so well as this. Nigel found this out ; she used to put it on every evening they spent at home. He would call her his Beatrice and all manner of absurd and impossible names, to which she listened with the greatest gravity ; do what he would he could never call the faintest blush to her cheeks—the wild roses had faded with her captivity—and with all his efforts she looked older and more worn every day.

Late hours suited Barbara as little as they do most people ; her days and even her nights passed in one whirl of excitement. Nigel was determined that she should see all the London sights ; the Straths' carriage rolled from museum to picture galleries, and to all manner of odd out-of-the-way places, quite out of the reckoning of the powdered footman, to whom the parks and a few squares constituted London. Barbara liked the parks ; she and Nigel used to have long rides before luncheon up and down the deserted Rotten Row : he was getting proud of Bab's horsemanship now. He took her to see the skating on the Serpentine, and Bab thought it a very pretty sight as she walked under the leafless trees in her new furs ; in the evening they went to the theatres or the English Opera, or spent quiet genial hours at the Fords'—Bab preferred anything to the evenings they spent at home ; and though the constant effort to appear cheerful and amused was wearing her out, her flagging spirits were less noticeable than in the long *tête-à-têtes* which invariably followed their stately dinner. But whether she went out or stayed at home, there was always the same

weight on her. She used to sit listlessly in the shops, thinking of Sunningford and Norman, while Lady Strath turned over all manner of shining fabrics for her trousseau; her indifference was a constant source of complaint; when her taste was questioned she had rarely any choice, except that she showed a provoking preference for browns and greys, and all sorts of Quaker-like tint. She would drum on the counter with her French kid glove, humming weary little airs, when Lady Strath turned angrily away. Nigel used to hover over the wonderful combination of colours, choosing a blue here, and a sea-green there, and trying all sorts of effects with lace draperies.

"Am I going to wear all these? you will make a harlequin of me," she would say, wrinkling up her brows at him. There it was again, tra-la-la tra-la-la, what a pretty air it was; and there would rise before her the picture of a girl going out to drink tea in her one silk dress—a grey, soft grey—such as he loved, with dainty little ruffles, and a crimson rose as a breast-knot. "Barbara, I think we will go and hear Fechter to-night." Barbara looks up with a start, and shakes herself. She yawns fearfully all the way home under her veil, while Lady Strath chatters about her purchases. Nigel chimes in; it is all blue and rose colour over again. A pair of kindly eyes, deep set under rugged brows, haunt her as they drive through the snowy streets. "It is the last day of the old year," says Bab, with a sudden shiver. "I don't think we will go and hear Fechter to-night, Nigel; let us call on Leigh and go to the Eve service instead."

Leigh had a pleasant house in Bayswater; Barbara used to coax Nigel to take her there often. Ruth would receive them with her usual placid cheerfulness, a little shy, perhaps, when Nigel was there, and yet not without a certain pride in showing off the treasures of her new home.

She and Leigh treated Nigel as their benefactor; it was touching to see their gratitude to him. They contrived little banquets, and feasted them with all manner of pleasant cates. It was certainly rather strange to see Leigh at the head of his table, with his little maidservant behind him, carving the simple dishes and dispensing boyish jokes. When anything went wrong he and Ruth exchanged glances of dismay; Ruth used to redden terribly over these little failures. The brightness of her glass and the mixing of her puddings were sources of secret pride to her; she presided over her pretty tea-table, filling the cups with fragrant Bohea, with the delight of a

Hebe, her beauty and simplicity filling Nigel with astonishment. "What a grand creature, she moves like a goddess," he would say; "there is something almost eloquent in her silence. She gives you a cup of tea with the majesty of a Mrs. Siddons or a Juno, no wonder Leigh half worships her—lucky rogue; but he treats her as a child too; fancy calling a superb being like that to order because she has forgotten the cream."

"Does Juno pour out tea?" says Bab, with a faint smile; she and Nigel are walking home together in the starlight. By and by it became almost a habit of theirs to spend Sunday evening at Leigh's; Nigel used to play over the grand old airs that he and Barbara had heard at the Cathedral or some west-end church that morning; fine old symphonies over which Barbara would dream sadly enough in her corner, fragments of Gounod's Mass, "I know that my Redeemer liveth"—Nigel's eyes always got soft and dark as he sang this. Barbara noticed that he was never restless on Sundays; she used to envy the devout way in which he knelt during the prayers at church, his face always beautiful in its earnestness, and his attention seldom wandering as hers did. He never spoke of his feelings; Barbara never heard a single word from him that showed he thought more about these things than other young men; he was always ready to jest when he came out, perhaps he was even more light-hearted for the brief restraint; and yet there was that in his manner at such times that seemed a rebuke upon her hardness; and there was very little doubt, that in spite of all his faultiness and passion, he realised the grandeur and truth of religion far more than Barbara did, though it must be averred that he failed to carry out many of its precepts.

But perhaps, after all, he was more sinned against than sinning; Barbara always thought so.

Things went on pretty tolerably till the beginning of the year, when Nigel caught a slight cold; it was not much of a cold, certainly; but it confined him to the house; his cough harassed his nights, and the weather was very severe; with his indisposition all his irritability returned, he became more exacting; Barbara was never suffered to be out of his sight, except during her afternoon drives with Lady Strath; there was no more play-going or pleasant evenings at Bayswater, the great drawing-rooms were lighted up brilliantly every evening now, and Barbara began to shrink with a secret sense of dread

from the endlessly recurring *tête-à-têtes*, knowing as she did, that her gravity was a source of dissatisfaction to him.

The mornings were better, she could read to him, or sing her simple little ballads to please him, or make the writing of home-letters an excuse for being quiet; but in the evening there was no such occupation; Lady Strath would come down splendidly dressed, and then there would be the great solemn dinner; but three or four evenings out of the week she would leave them alone after coffee was brought in, to go into the Fords' for an hour or two, returning home in time to wish them good-night; Barbara used to pray and beg her not to leave them, but she had a way of putting aside all such requests, when interfering with her own pleasure. Nigel never missed her, he wanted nobody but Barbara now, she would say rather bitterly, but in truth she found their society rather dull.

Barbara found it dull too; the great rooms blazing with wax-lights and fires—Nigel loved an almost tropical heat—oppressed her like some gaudy prison; she would watch Lady Strath sweep away in her ermine cloak, and go and lean against the window, and look out at the dark square, and the star-light; it put her in mind somehow of Ben and the pine-woods; poor Ben, how he must miss his little mistress, what would she not give to be back again, with him in her own little den, anywhere where she might be alone, and not answering questions.

"What are you doing there, Babette, don't you know I want to talk to you?" Barbara would sigh as she heard the fretful tone.

"It is all so light, and so hot, and brilliant here, Nigel," she would say; "there is no shade, no relief anywhere; I am only resting my eyes by looking out at the dark square;" but she would drop the curtain, and come away obediently, for all that, for he was beginning to rule her with the same rod of iron with which he ruled his mother.

How Bab wearied of his talk!

It was always the same—always running in the same groove, his plans for the future; she could not understand that such talk was only natural to a lover, she used to sit mute and weary as he mapped out the route they must take in the spring; his description of the Swiss chalets and Italian palaces, to which he meant to introduce her, were received intelligently, but without any attempt at rapture. He could

not awake her enthusiasm for the picture galleries of the Vatican, or the Bridge of Sighs ; if she were to inhabit the Doge's Palace at Venice, she would have equally disappointed him by her want of surprise ; a few months ago, how differently would she have felt and acted ; and now, with all her efforts, she could not listen to his plans with any pretence at cheerfulness ; what was the whole world of beauty and art to her now, since Norman had left her ?

And there was another reason why the strain told so painfully on her ; late hours, constant excitement, and the tear and wear of harassed nerves were telling wonderfully on her fine constitution ; deprived of air and sunlight, and with no more exercise than a drive in a close carriage with Lady Strath, all her walks and rides suddenly broken off, no wonder she grew more fatigued and spiritless every day ; she was home-sick too, and yearning for her father, and Leigh was kept from her by business, and yet Nigel was always teasing her to show more interest in a plan that would involve an absence of months, and almost angering her with his unreasonable reproaches, always uttered when she could least bear them.

It was easy to see that things would soon come to a climax, but it came sooner than she expected.

One evening when Lady Strath had so left them, and they were sitting together in the great drawing-room, Nigel brought out his collection of photographs, to show her some beautiful Neapolitan views, interlarding his conversation, as usual, with all manner of pleasant castles in the air, which Barbara and he were to inhabit. It happened that Barbara was more downcast than usual that day ; she did not feel well either, and the heat of the room oppressed her, and though she looked at the views, and listened dutifully, her answers were so brief and unsatisfactory, so altogether distraught, that Nigel was half offended.

"What are you thinking about, Barbara ?" he asked, in a vexed sort of voice.

It might have been the unexpected suddenness of the question, or that she felt her wandering thoughts convicted her, but she reddened so deeply, and in a way he had never seen her, that face, brow, and even her neck, were in one crimson glow ; such a sight as that did not tend to reassure him, especially as instead of answering him, she only bent over another photograph, as though to conceal her embarrassment.

"This will never do !" he said, taking it out of her hands, with one of his gloomy looks. "I suppose you think I am

content to have you sitting beside me, evening after evening, and to know that your thoughts are as far from me as though I were the merest stranger ; how many months have we been engaged, Barbara ? and I am not a bit nearer to you than I was at the beginning ! ”

She hung her head, as though every word were making itself felt.

“ You are freezing me with your coldness,” he continued, “ what have I done, that you should keep me at this distance ? Could any lover have been more devoted than I ? have you ever framed a wish that I have not sought to gratify, whatever it may cost me ? have I not shared every thought and feeling, ay, and every hope with you ? what have I done, I say, that you should treat me like this ? ” and as he spoke, the weight of his love and anger was so terrible to her, that she hardly knew how to answer.

“ Indeed, Nigel, you have been too good to me,” she said at length.

“ Good ! Ay, and how have you repaid me ? I begin to think I am a poor-spirited creature after all, to put up tamely with such treatment : Barbara,” turning on her with a sudden fierce inflexion of voice,—“ Barbara, did you lie when you told me you would be mine ? ”

She recoiled from him a step, as though he had struck her. “ Oh, Nigel ! ”

“ Hush, I did not mean to frighten you,” he returned, his vehement tone softening a little ; “ I beg your pardon, I forgot myself in my passion, this dark blood of mine will make itself felt sometimes ; of course I know that you never pretended to love me, but then I thought how sweet it would be to teach you ! ”

“ I do love you, very, very dearly ! ” she said in a low voice.

“ That may be, but then you also love Ben ! I think sometimes his share is almost larger than mine ; no, you have never deceived me, I know that, but tell me, Barbara, is there any reason that with all my wooing, you are not won ? ”

She drooped her head still lower as he spoke ; how was she to answer, could she strain her truth, and tell him there was no such reason.

“ What am I to think from your silence ? ” he continued. “ Barbara, you must answer me.”

“ Oh no, I cannot,” she replied ; “ did I not always fear

that I should never make you happy, and now it is coming true, and oh, Nigel, I have tried so hard to do my duty."

"There it is again," he returned angrily, "every word out of your own mouth convicts you; would there be a question of duty between us if you loved me, would it not come as naturally as your breathing does; you are always promising to be good to me; do you think I care for such goodness, Barbara?"

"I suppose not," she answered sadly.

"I think it is pitiful stuff that you offer me, not worthy of any reasonable man's acceptance, but I am not a reasonable man, as you have often told me. I have sworn that willingly or unwillingly you shall be my wife, and now I fear my judgment is come upon me."

"What shall I do, oh what shall I do?" she said, full of distress.

"What must we both do? you mean; but Barbara, I will never give you up, you are the very light of my eyes and the desire of my heart in spite of your hardness; tell me, if you will, how I am to win you; it has come to this, that I will woo you on your own terms."

"Poor friend, poor Nigel!"

"Poor Ben, you mean, I don't think he ever begged quite so humbly; I say that I must win you, Barbara, I want your heart and your spirit for my own, my very own; and not only this little hand, the thoughts that you think as well as the words that you speak; I cannot fathom your thoughts, they do not belong to me."

"I wish I were dead," she answered, in a voice that was choked by emotion.

"Why do you wish that? You are always wishing it, I know; I think you are trying me to the utmost. Barbara, I ask you again, and this time I will have an answer; is there any reason why I fail to make you happy?"

"You will make me happy soon, Nigel."

"Soon; ah, that will not do, I must have my answer now. Then there is some such reason?"

She remained silent.

"Is there any defect in me that should make it an impossibility, Barbara?"

"No, a thousand times, no."

"That is well. I don't know quite how I look in your eyes; but Barbara"—with a sudden thought—"it is not, it

cannot be, that you have loved some one else, how could you—but that is impossible."

It was coming out then ; oh this was terrible, terrible.

"Nigel," she said, touching him with her trembling fingers, as though they could avert his wrath ; "if you have any love, any pity, you would forbear to question me ; what is past is over and gone now, over and gone."

"Then you have loved somebody !" he persisted. Alas ! her quick blush was sufficient answer ; "and you have deceived me after all."

"If I have, it was for your own good, Nigel."

"Tush, to leave me working on blindfold, I suppose. Who was he ? I have a right to know his name, Barbara."

"You have no right, and I will never tell you," she answered firmly.

"No right ?"

"No, none at all, it is all over, as I told you ; you must leave the past where it is, the future if you will belongs to you."

"Do you think I will marry you like this, Barbara !" he said passionately ; "if you do not answer my question, I shall go to your father."

"No, oh no !" she cried, almost beside herself ; "go to Daddy ! indeed you must do no such thing, Nigel."

"But I will. Have you ever known me go from my word ? I am determined to know this thing, Barbara, and from the beginning to the end too ; it is not possible, no, the idea is preposterous, it could not have been Norman." Then she buried her face in her hands and gave herself for lost, but her agony was nothing to Nigel's.

"Do you mean that it was Norman then ?"

"Oh, Nigel, I would never have told you." Then he sat down and there was silence for a long time between them.

"Barbara, come here ;" and as she went to him, she saw that he looked broken-hearted.

"You may as well tell me how it all happened," he said, speaking with difficulty ; "I suppose it must be true, but I find it hard to believe it."

"There is nothing much to tell, Nigel. I always meant to repose entire confidence in you when we were married."

"When we are," he corrected.

"Yes, when we are, but you see you have forestalled it, and I was keeping it from you for your good ; it was only my mother's story over again, Nigel."

His troubled eyes seemed to ask her to go on.

"I don't know how it happened, but at one time I disliked him, he was so hard and so satirical, you know, and I fancied that he laughed at me; but after a year or two we began to be friends, and just at the time of your accident I was learning to love him."

"Only then, Barbara?"

"Yes, only then, he was so good to me, you know; but what is the use of talking about it? we could never have been married."

"Why not; did he not love you?"

"I suppose he did, but it was a very hard and cold sort of love. I know at one time that he meant to make me his wife, and then, when he got poor, everything changed with him."

"Do you mean when the Spanish mines broke?"

"Yes; just before he went away we had a walk together, and he told me he should never marry. There was anger in his voice as he told me that, as though he found his lot bitter to him."

"But did he give no reason for this sudden change? I don't understand it; such fickleness is not like Norman, it could not have all been because he was poor."

Then she became silent again.

"Try to remember what he said, Barbara. Did he give you no clue to his conduct?"

"I don't know whether I ought to repeat it," she said hesitatingly; "he did say something about a promise that was obliging him to go away—he gave it as a reason for his not marrying."

"A promise?"

"I think it must have been a vow, but I am not sure. I forget whether he said it was a secret; he gave me the idea that it was some atonement. I know it was to make somebody happy whom he had known as a boy,—what is the matter, Nigel? oh what have I said?" she continued in infinite distress, for Nigel had started violently now, and his face was almost like death.

"Dear Nie, you must not be so unhappy, it is all past now."

"Past, is it! Fool that I was never to suspect this! I see it now, I see it all clearly now—of course my mother told him."

"What do you mean?" she asked timidly; but he went on without heeding her:

"No wonder his manner was so changed to me, poor Norman; no wonder he treated all my offers of help as though they were so many insults; how could she, how could she goad him to such a sacrifice?"

"What sacrifice, Nigel?—you are terrifying me."

"Am I?" he said with a smile that touched her more than anything, it was so sweet and sad; "nay, I did not mean to frighten you. Come nearer to me, Barbara, my passion has burnt itself out now; feel how my heart is beating, thumping rather. Sometimes I think it would have been wrong for me to marry; I have a fancy, do you know, that I shall die young."

"Oh, God forbid, Nigel!"

"How earnestly you speak. Why, you were wishing to die yourself a few minutes ago, and now you would have me think that my life was of value in your eyes."

"And is it not? Oh, Nigel, how can you be so cruel?"

"Nay, I am happy to hear it, my beloved. How worn and tired you look; lay down that pretty brown head on my arm. You have not often suffered me to hold you like this, but to-night I would have it so."

She put up her face and kissed him, as she had done once before.

"Oh, that was sweet! Dear, I cannot bear to think how I have made you suffer. I tempted you to sacrifice yourself in your sorrow, and then quarrelled with the little you gave me. I did not think it was in your nature to be so patient as you have been with me."

"It is you who were always noble, Nigel."

"No, oh no; but mine was the error of love. I did not know that you were not to be won, Barbara; you ought to have come and told me all this at the first, dear child."

"I could not—I could not," she sighed.

"Well, perhaps not. Norman had left you in such ignorance, you see, and you would have thought that I would not have accepted your sacrifice. Oh, when I think of what these months must have been to you, I am ready to cry shame upon myself."

"Oh, we shall be happier now, Nigel."

"Shall we, dear?"

"Yes. I am so glad that you know all, it has been such a weight on me; and now you will know that I have tried so hard to do my duty—you must not let all this make you un-

happy, Nie ; you must remember how it was with my pretty young mother, but in the end she came to love Daddy."

"Do you mean to try and love me then, Barbara?"

"Oh, do I not? And you are so kind to me that it ought not to be so hard. I think I shall be able to talk to you better than I have ever done yet."

"I hope so, darling. You were always fond of your old St. Ronans ; some day, when you look back on this conversation, it will make you very happy to remember how I loved you, and how you were perfect in my eyes ; I am afraid I have made you an idol, Barbara."

She smiled up in his face without answering.

"You must never reproach yourself, whatever happens ; it was only I that was to blame, always remember that ; you are only my darling who has made me happy."

"Who will try to do so ; why do you sigh, Nigel? Indeed, indeed, I mean to be a faithful wife to you."

Oh, with his broken heart how was he to answer her?

"It is getting late now," he said, loosing her from his arms ; "why has my mother not returned, I wonder. Come, you must take your weary little face upstairs, Barbara ; good-night—God bless you, my darling."

But for the first time in her life, she almost clung to him.

"I cannot bear to leave you somehow ; are you sure you have forgiven me, Nigel? You have never wished me good-night so solemnly before."

"Have I not? I don't think I ever loved you quite so much as I do to-night ; may all good angels guard you, my dear one." He caught her to his heart as he spoke, and kissed the face and the little hands passionately, and then blessed her again and let her go ; but as Barbara dragged her way wearily up the great staircase, she turned round and saw him at the foot still watching her.

Bab has a dim fancy, among many other such thoughts, that one day as she climbs up the golden stairs—the ladder of stars, as she will have it—she shall see him waiting for her at the top, with her guardian angel beside him, with just the same sweet solemn smile upon his face, only without its sadness ; and so, led between them, shall come "to the great vision of the Face of Christ."

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The stillness of night crept over the stately house in Port-

man Square, and then the faint chill dawn of a winter's morning ; the drowsy servants crept down one by one and went about their work unwillingly, talking under their breaths of this or that thing that was to happen, never dreaming what the day had in store for them any more than Barbara had, sleeping under her canopy of painted Cupids.

At the usual hour the valet went up to his master's room, and put back the heavy curtains that draped the chamber in gloom ; he laid out the silver apparatus on the dressing-table with his usual elaborate care, and then stepped up to the bed, wondering greatly that no sleepy voice had summoned him, and then he started back in surprise. . . .

Stretched on the coverlet, fully dressed, as though he had thrown himself down in pain, his face half hidden in the pillows, and the fair hair clinging damply round his temples, lay the young master ; something in the attitude, in the profound stillness, smote the servant with vague fear, and he turned the face tenderly in his hands to the light. And there, with the sweet solemn smile still curving his lips, with his great beautiful eyes fixed and lustreless, was the lifeless form of the young heir—the soul of Nigel Strath was with its God.

One swift, brief agony and it was over ; in the stillness of the night, when other happy sleepers were dreaming of the coming day, the Dark Angel, who had so often threatened the first-born of the house, now crossed the threshold with his unsheathed sword in his hand ; alone he had met him face to face—alone he had grappled with him, measuring his strength against one whose name was "Secret ;" there he bowed, he fell down, calling upon his God to save him. Hush, tread softly, this is holy ground ; for so "He giveth His beloved sleep."

Oh, draw we a veil over what followed. Why need we describe the miserable mother raving like a mad woman amid the doctors and servants, trying remedies that were alike fruitless and distressing. Rather would I tell how a few hours later, a little figure, dry-eyed and strangely still, crept to his side and nestled in the dead breast. Ah, Barbara, unhappy child, what reck's it to him though you draw those heavy arms about your neck, and cover those cold hands with passionate kisses ; never more shall his love, strong as death, enfold you—never more shall he call you his darling, his darling ; never more shall his passion and his anger terrify you with their weird beauty ; he cannot hear the tearless sobs with which you call upon his

name ; he cannot hear you tell him that you loved him, though not as he might wish. Ah ! better to slip to your knees and take the dead hand solemnly between your own as you are now doing, and pray that your God may make you worthy to meet him in a land where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain ;" where earthly passions shall be smoothed away, and the dross of human love refined, and he and you and all that have so loved and suffered, shall be "even as the angels."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE UNFINISHED LETTER.

" In my ears
The sound of waters. There he stood, my King !

" I felt him rather than beheld him. If
I rose, as if he were my King indeed,
And then sat down in trouble at myself
And struggling for my woman's empery.
'Tis pitiful : but women are so made—
We'll die for you perhaps—'tis probable :
But we'll not spare you an inch of our full length."

AURORA LEIGH.

WE need not linger over this sad portion of Barbara's history ; there are sorrows, remorse, which are best understood by a sacred silence, a few words may sometimes condense the sufferings of years.

For in the multitude of words there is weakness, and vain repetitions become expressionless, and fall short of their due meaning. What though the culminating point of Barbara Heathcote's Trial is reached, and she looks out over a barren waste of years, dejected and objectless, regarding herself as one of God's maidens, sent out into the field of life to glean after the reapers the few joys that they let fall, an ear or two of ripened comfort, which she may, if she will, bind up with her scanty sheaf.

For a few long miserable days Barbara crept about the darkened house like a guilty thing ; the burden of her remorse was such that she almost believed herself to be Nigel's murderer. Lady Strath kept herself closely shut up in her own apart-

ments, refusing to be comforted; she and Barbara had only met once, but the interview had been so bitter that neither could have borne to have it repeated; Lady Strath had reproached her with her coldness and want of love to Nigel, and almost hinted that greater affection might have prolonged his life; and the poor girl had listened to her, as dumb as though the words convicted her with awful truth, and then had crept silently away: but half the night afterwards they could hear her pacing her room like a wild thing, and sobbing as though her heart would break. Her mind was on such a morbid strain that if relief had not come nervous fever must have been the consequence; but at the end of a week comfort came to her in an unexpected form.

The old physician who had warned Nigel about his health, came to see Lady Strath in her trouble, and was full of compassion for the desolate little creature whom he met wandering aimlessly about the rooms; his kind words inspired Barbara with gratitude, and on the impulse of the moment she opened her heart to him, and showed him all her grief.

It was the wisest thing she could have done, and it saved her.

"My dear," he said, taking her hand in his fatherly way, "I am glad you have told me this, for I may be able to help you; indeed, you must not reproach yourself so severely; the poor boy died, we may truly say, by the visitation of God; but it was not unexpected."

"Not unexpected, Dr. Jordan?"

"No, Nigel and his mother too were fully aware of his precarious state; I don't wish to blame him, poor lad, but if he had come to me, I should have warned him against marrying; indeed, I said as much to him when he was last in London, but I suppose he did not understand me. Amongst other things, he had an aggravated form of heart disease; he might have died any time during the last ten years."

"Yes; but I hastened his death; Lady Strath said that I did."

"Did she say so? that was very wrong; but you must not let her words trouble you; it was true that any form of excitement accelerated the action of the heart fearfully; but I have always found with Nigel, that any pleasurable excitement was attended with exactly the same result; indeed, from the post-mortem examination, I am inclined to think that under the most favourable circumstances you could not have kept him

with you for more than a year or two ; Dr. Heathcote could hardly have been aware of this in permitting you to marry him ; you see none of the doctors at Sunningford examined him, and that sort of complaint is very deceptive."

"If I could only bring myself to believe this," sighed Barbara ; "but oh, that unhappy conversation."

"I don't think it was so much the talk," returned the doctor, "as the attempt to write that letter in his agitated state, that brought on the fatal attack."

"What letter?" interrupted Barbara, very much startled.

"Why, have they not told you there was a fragment of one—a mere beginning,—evidently intended for his cousin Dr. Strath? it was lying by his Bible, poor boy, and it is rather a strange coincidence that he should have scored the words in the open page so deeply with his pen, 'I write unto you young men, because you have overcome the wicked one.' It seems to imply some conflict of mind which took place, perhaps before he commenced that letter ; nay, my child, you must not take it to heart like this."

"Oh, what shall I do?" she sobbed ; "he was writing to Norman then ; oh, I know, I can guess what he said. Dr. Jordan, I must see that letter ; you must beg Lady Strath to let me have it, things are so between us that I cannot speak to her myself, and, indeed, it has nothing to do with her."

"Well, I will do what I can for you," he answered, as he rose, and then he went up to Lady Strath. It was some time before he returned, looking very grave, but with the letter in his hand ; he had evidently had some difficulty in obtaining it, but all he said was, that Lady Strath wished to have nothing to do with sending it ; it was in Barbara's hand now, and she might act as she pleased. Barbara thanked him, and then withdrew silently to her room ; but her tears fell so fast that it was some time before she could decipher clearly the blurred trembling hand in which it was written ; it was as Dr. Jordan had told her—a mere fragment ; but how pregnant with generous meaning to her ; now, indeed, she understood the scored text ; truly strength was made perfect in weakness, his hour of conflict was also his hour of victory.

"My dear Norman," it began, but the few lines were torn and ragged, and blistered with tears before Norman saw them.

"MY DEAR NORMAN—I have heard all to-night ; Barbara loves you, and you have deserted her like a madman, a generous madman too ; and now I am going to tell you what we must all

do, unless,—there my pain is coming on,—unless my heart breaks before I can get it written ; for I am ill, Norman, and there is a strange foreboding on me to-night that I shall never see my darling again.

“ But, indeed, you have cruelly wronged her, if you believe her fickle, for she dearly loves you, and you only ; I believe she was so truly miserable when you left her that she hardly cared what became of her ; and then it was, that I induced her to engage herself to me, by promising to befriend her father in his trouble ; she is sacrificing herself for the old man’s sake, and it is I who tempted her to it.

“ Norman, you have behaved like a madman, God bless you ; but if I can undo my sin and help you, I will ; though the doing of it may kill me ; oh this pain ! where am I ? there, you shall have her, as surely as she is mine, I will give her to you, if you will make her happy, but——”

Ah, then it was that he laid down his pen, and that he called upon his God to help him, for the hour of his mortal anguish was come, and he must stretch himself upon his bed, while the Dark Presence was drawing him slowly home.

Barbara showed no one that letter ; and neither did she send it to Norman.

And it was the second great mistake of Barbara’s life.

It never entered into her bewildered brains that she was detaining Norman’s property unjustifiably ; if she had questioned her own conscience at all, which she did from time to time, she assured herself that it was her right so to detain it, seeing that it was a confidence between her and Nigel ; if she sent it or permitted her father to send it, would it not oblige Norman to marry her whether he would or not, and had he not told her in plain terms that he could never marry ; the very thought that he should be brought to know of her hopeless love set her pulses tingling with a sense of shame ; she could not understand Nigel’s vague sentences with regard to Norman himself ; left so completely in the dark as to his true reasons for leaving her, it was hardly possible that she could grope her way to the light, and though perhaps we may blame her conduct, we can at least understand it, seeing that such proud natures as Barbara’s are given to hide all such maidenly secrets even to their own bitter cost.

At the end of the dismal week Dr. Heathcote came and fetched her away ; and so Barbara went back to Sunningford. But she was so truly heart-broken that it might be said that

all places were alike to her ; for some time her father's tenderness, and the watchful care with which Hester and Connie tended her, failed to rouse her from the state of listless misery in which she had sunk ; and her thin face and piteous dark eyes, as she sat silently among them, or wandered dejectedly in the old garden with only Ben as her companion, filled them with grave concern for her health ; but as Dr. Heathcote told them, it was only the reaction from months of excitement and overwrought feeling, and when the summer came his Bab would recover her old looks again.

But indeed, he was ignorant of the full extent of the mischief or the sick loneliness that came on her, when she sat by Nigel's grave, or wandered in the pine-woods, or through the deserted lawns of St. Ronans, the summer came, but she still drooped and pined ; and then the autumn, and it was not till the first sad anniversary of Nigel's death was passed, that she began to take up her employments with anything like her old zest, and then not until after a long visit she had spent at Hunsden. From the first she had clung to Nest, as her greatest comfort ; Dr. Heathcote encouraged their intimacy, thinking it good for Barbara. Hunsden Park was a very cheerful place now under its little mistress, and though Nest truly mourned for her brother, she was too devoted a wife to let her own personal sadness interfere with her husband's happiness ; and it was she who first induced Barbara to take up her painting again, and make it the solace of her disappointed life.

It was wonderful what good effects resulted from this sensible advice ; Barbara first grew busy, then interested, then she began to begrudge the time she had wasted in brooding over her troubles ; she took her walks for refreshment now, and not to indulge her grief unobserved ; she slept better, the colour came back to her face, her gravity grew less intense as the winter went on ; her work prospered, success was in prospect ; by and by came the assurance of reality, when she was an acknowledged artist. Her picture was very much admired, before Sir Geoffrey bought it ; it was a simple subject, "Children nutting in the woods ;" but there was a very favourable mention of it in the London papers. Barbara laughed her old merry laugh when her father read it out to her.

After that she might be said to have lived for her art ; picture after picture was designed and painted. She began to be known for a very fair artist ; her groups of children were

especially admired. Sunningford grew proud of its rising genius ; the second Miss Heathcote was pointed out as one of the lions of the place to curious strangers ; and it was owned now on all sides that poor Nigel Strath had some foundation for his choice.

Barbara used to smile one of her shrewd smiles when these comments reached her ; she was growing more old-fashioned than ever now ; in her quiet staidness, it did not matter to her, she said, what people thought of her, so long as she painted good pictures, and did her duty, she was glad of the money, for her father's sake, and that was all. Hester used to rebuke her fondly for her indifference ; she was very proud of Barbara now. "It is wrong to have no interest of your own in life," she would say, "though you are an artist, and people think so much of you, I do not believe you are half so happy as I am with my children and old women."

"I don't believe that I am, Essie," the girl would answer sadly ; and she would droop her head over her easel. Every Sunday she would go and lay fresh garlands on Nigel's grave ; when she sat there in the long summer evenings, she would wonder what Norman was doing, and whether, when they were old, they would meet again. "I don't think Norman will look well as an old man," she would say to herself ; "his face will harden, and get more severe, I expect. How splendidly he is getting on. He told me he was assured of success ;" and she would take out Mrs. Strath's last letter, and read it.

Mrs. Strath was not a good correspondent, her letters were "few and far between ;" Barbara's were not more frequent, a sort of barrier had grown up between those two, which, at that distance, was not very easy to break down. Mrs. Strath told Barbara about the wonderful cure that was making Norman's fortune—Norman called it a fluke, in his satirical way—but it was true that people were flocking to him from all sides. In his few letters to the doctor he sent brief messages to his three daughters, but never, by any chance, mentioned Barbara alone, except in his mother's note of condolence after his cousin's death.

And all this time Nigel's unfinished letter was hidden away among Barbara's precious things.

Three years are over and gone—three whole years—and again the winter snows have heaped themselves about the old fir-trees and lie like a white mantle over the long lawn at Heathcote House.

It has been rather an eventful Christmas—for another

bonnie boy has made his appearance in the snug little house at Bayswater—not Bab's boy, however ; this one is decreed by the young parents to be Hester's by right, but Hester has been obliged to stand proxy, for grand preparations have been going on for a long time at Heathcote House, and that very week Connie was to be married to her faithful Sydney. It was a very pretty sight for a winter's wedding, and Connie made a winsome bride ; Bab did not look her best, she had a worried anxious expression that made her face look old and worn under her smart bridesmaid's bonnet ; Hester was beautiful by comparison, her eyes so full of love for the child-sister she was going to lose ; the fuss and agitation did not seem to fret her as they did Bab, poor Bab, whose unmade trousseau had lain under lock and key in Hester's room for three years now.

It was a great relief when the house was quiet, and they had fallen into their old ways again ; both missed Connie sorely, but Hester's loss was by far the greatest ; yet, with that sweet unselfishness which came upon her with her maturer years, she insisted on Barbara's fulfilling her long talked of visit to Leigh, not listening to her oft-repeated protests that they were too dull for her to leave them.

Things were settled when Leigh came down to fetch her himself, and she consented with a tolerable grace to accompany him back ; these visits to Bayswater, were, as Hester knew, her greatest refreshments ; she was never happier than when sitting in their pretty drawing-room, nursing Leigh's boy. It was, therefore, with no small degree of pleasure that she went about her hurried preparations. Leigh's society always cheered her, and during their long journey, she even condescended to discuss the details of the wedding, though she very gladly left off to question him about the new baby. "Was he at all like his brother—baby Leigh—and was Ruth disappointed that it was not a girl?" No, Ruth was not disappointed, she was too sensible for such stuff ; and if Barbara wanted to make friends with such a bald red-faced little piece of humanity she might, but, as to being like his elder brother, Leigh considered it an insult to his first-born. Ruth had dared to suggest a likeness to himself, and here Leigh smoothed over his handsome face and budding moustache, as though he felt himself injured ; and then both laughed and were in high good spirits by the time the train had steamed into the station.

There was the usual fuss over the luggage—rather augmented this time by Leigh insisting on kidnapping an old lady's trunk

on the pretext it was Barbara's ; but it was all over at last, and they were driving through the brilliant streets.

"I have not asked any of your artist friends to meet you, Bab, not even Scolie ; I thought you would rather be cosy with Ruth and myself to-night, and Ruth is wild to hear about the wedding."

"I am sure that I am very glad that you have not," answered Bab, "I am quite sick of fuss, and dinners ; and company is not very pleasant after a long journey ; and then there are my boys, you know. Oh Gyp, it will be so nice to see baby Leigh again."

"Baby Gyp, I suppose you mean——hallo ! what are you after, cabby ? the third house on the right-hand side, I told you."

"That's the house ; come, quick, open the door," and Leigh jumped out, dragging Barbara after him, and ringing with a peal that informed the whole terrace that Leigh Heathcote, Esq., was come home.

"Where is mamma Ruth ?" was his first question, and then Ruth appeared on the stairs, looking sweeter and fairer than ever, with a very small boy by her side, in a wide sash, and his head running all over with bright yellow curls.

"Dear Leigh, have you brought Barbara ? Oh, there she is," as the little figure darted out of the dark hall ; and, as the two women embraced warmly, she whispered : "Oh, Barbara, I cannot tell you how glad I am you have come this evening."

"To see Master Rolf, I suppose ?" said Bab, with another hug, "how refreshing it is to see your dear beautiful face again ; there, take me up in the nursery now, and don't stand looking after Leigh, he always dawdles about in the dining-room first thing."

"Yes, dear, I am coming ; you must be perished with cold, too. Baby, take Auntie up into mother's room, I'll be with you directly."

"Hallo, Rue, whom are you expecting to dinner ? Janet has laid four places," and Leigh appeared at the door with an air of disgust ; "that's nonsense, Boy can't come in till dessert."

Ruth flushed scarlet, "It is all right, Janet," she said, waving off the little handmaid, "if you will come up into your dressing-room, Leigh, I will tell you all about it ; I am only expecting an old friend that we shall all be glad to see. Barbara, please take Boy up to the Nursery."

"Mr. Noah's here," cried Boy, as he ascended the stairs, his

sash floating splendidly behind him. "Boy has broken the lion and the cock-a-doodle-doo. Will Mr. Noah cry?"

"No," says Bab, "who wants Mr. Noah—bless you!" and she accelerates matters by snatching him up and smothering him with kisses. Ruth and Leigh find them playing at peep-bo between the banisters, and Ruth again makes that remark about being perished with cold. "It is all baby Leigh's fault," cries Bab, and then she makes her muff into a pussy, and gives it him to carry upstairs; "take the poor thing right up into the nursery, mind," Boy promises, puts his right leg on the stair, and makes as though he would clamber up, he does get up the first flight, and then he pauses fondly to caress his pussy. "Go upstairs, sir!" says Bab, stamping her foot, the boy shakes his curls, looking lovely and just like his mother, and then bolts into a half-opened door, which happens to be the drawing-room; Bab rushes in after him, dragging her cloak after her; a gentleman who is reading a newspaper by the fire rises in some astonishment and looks at them.

"I beg your pardon," says poor Bab, in great confusion. "Boy would——" and then she looks up with a quick exclamation, "Norman! oh, Norman!" and feels all at once as though she would sink into the floor at the sound of her own agitated voice.

"Yes, it is I, Barbara. I suppose you did not expect to see me here to-night?" and he shakes hands with her gravely, and then they both sit down; at least, Dr. Strath places the chair for her, into which she sinks helplessly, and then he stirs the fire with unnecessary vigour, warming his hands over it before he takes possession of the opposite seat.

"It is very cold this evening," he observes at last, but still looking at the fire.

"Very cold, indeed," assents Barbara, and then to her relief Boy clambers up into her lap. She is sure that her face is absolutely white, and that her lips are trembling; now as she speaks, she rests them against the light yellow curls. Baby Leigh never got so many kisses in his life as Bab now bestows upon him, as she arranges and rearranges that prodigious sash of his with her cold fingers. She does not dare to look at the opposite chair; of all the strange dreams that had ever come to her, this is the strangest.

Dr. Strath looks much as usual, except that he takes so strong an interest in the fire as he talks or answers Barbara; every now and then he administers meditative pokes, bringing

little jets of coloured gas out of a soft shining mass of coal ; the fire pictures are evidently pleasanter to him than the little figure wrapped in furs opposite, with the smiling boy on her lap.

"It is very cold," he remarks again ; "and then you have just come off a journey. I know I was half frozen as I came up from Liverpool."

"When did you arrive in England, Norman ?" Boy has made a grenadier of himself by crowning his head with Bab's muff. It is a most convenient shield for her question.

"Oh, I only arrived yesterday. I came up to London by the night mail not to lose any time, and as soon as I had breakfasted, walked on here in the hope of seeing Leigh, but he was at Sunningford."

"Yes ; he very kindly came down to fetch me."

"So Mrs. Leigh said, and then she asked me to come this evening to dinner. I have come over to England on most unexpected business, and I want to bespeak Leigh's assistance if I can."

"On business ?"

"Yes ; an old relative of my mother, whose name I hardly remember ever hearing, has died and left us rather a nice little piece of property ; quite sufficient, that is, to make it worth my while to come over to England and rescue it from a shark of a lawyer who threatens to devour it bodily. I want to coin it into money if I can, and that's how it is you find me here to-night."

"Indeed," says Bab, whose nervousness returns on the grenadier cap being suddenly removed ; "I wonder what has become of Ruth. How was your mother when you left her, Norman ?"

"My mother, oh, she was very well ; only she wanted to come with me. She does not like New York at all ; I am afraid she is growing terribly home-sick."

"That is a pity," returned Bab, rather inaudibly ; Boy has jumped off her lap leaving her exposed at all points, and there was no knowing to what state of desperation she would have been reduced if Ruth had not made her appearance, full of apologies for leaving them so long. Bab crept under her wing without a word, and never looking at Norman, as he stood opening the door for them ; she followed Ruth upstairs still with the same dumbness till they came to the nursery, or mother's room as it was called, making no sort of sign whatever, when the great fair boy was laid in her arms.

"Is he not a beauty?" said the young mother rapturously ; "Nurse says he is the finest baby she has ever seen."

"Yes, he is very fine," responded Bab languidly ; "he is like you, Ruth ; are their hands always so crumpled?" and she stood looking helpless under the mass of white draperies.

Ruth laughed her musical laugh.

"Come to me, my beautiful ; auntie Bab has no eyes for you to-night," and she received her boy back with the soft coos peculiar to doves and mothers, inexplicable baby language, plaintive duets and solos, than which there is none sweeter on earth ; while Bab walked off by herself into the bright little room made snug and warm with fire-light and candles.

Ruth had not wasted her time, Bab's trunk was partially unpacked, and her pretty dinner-dress laid out on the bed ; Bab's first action was to throw it aside, and then she took out a grey silk—not the old grey silk, but another just like it, and put it on, sighing as though her heart would break ; and indeed she hardly knew what the tight hard pain that she felt meant, and if such tumult signified happiness or regret, or whether joy at seeing him predominated over the still remembered anguish of their parting, when he had spoken to her so coldly ; well, and was he not cold still, had he even asked how she was, had he looked at her, was not his face sterner than ever, as he sat opposite to her rubbing his hands in his old way, and speaking about the weather ?

Poor Bab, and for all that she would have liked to appear her best to-night ; but do what she would, she could not bring a vestige of colour to her face, which looked all of a sudden so worn and jaded ; she stood before the glass getting graver and sadder every minute, trying pitiful little effects with her rose-coloured ribbons, before she laid them aside with another sigh, and went downstairs looking like a grey wraith of herself, and with her forehead contracted nervously. She did not make her appearance till the last moment, and then only when she knew that they were waiting for dinner, and how she dreaded the next hour, and Leigh's jokes and personal remarks, only she herself knew.

But it passed off better than she expected, though when she came to recall the evening she could hardly remember a single sentence she uttered ; but Leigh talked glibly and Dr. Strath answered him ; if he wanted to shield Barbara from notice, he could not have done better, for he hardly addressed her once, and never looked at her except when she was otherwise occu-

pied ; and yet there was not a line or expression on the weary little face that was lost on him.

The gentlemen talked, and Ruth and Barbara exchanged little sentences about the children ; Boy came down to dessert, and sat by his aunt, who immediately concentrated her attention on him, till it was time for the ladies to retire ; when they got upstairs she made an excuse to Ruth, and threw herself down in a chair in the darkest end of the inner drawing-room ; and tried by every effort in her power to still her throbbing pulse, and bring her thoughts into some order ; " what is he to me, and what am I to him ? " she kept saying to herself, " why cannot I look at him, and why do the senseless words trip up each other on my tongue ? I will talk to him when he comes upstairs ; it is childish, nay, worse, it is absolutely foolish, and he is as cool and collected as though he saw me yesterday, only more indifferent, only, Heaven help me, a hundred times more indifferent than he ever was before."

So she thought, raging inwardly against herself ; Ruth forbore to disturb her, thinking she was tired, or perhaps guessing at the truth,—for Ruth always had a feeling that Dr. Strath was Barbara's real choice,—Bab heard her telling Leigh when he came up, that his sister was very weary ; it might have been their consideration then, that made them gather round the fire, leaving her in her dark corner in the inner drawing-room ; perhaps Dr. Strath could not distinguish the grey dress amidst the dimness ; anyhow, they were all three in a cosy circle on the hearthrug, and Dr. Strath was making them merry with Yankee anecdotes ; of course, it was her own fault, but it made her feel terribly lonely ; she could no more have come into their midst, and taken the chair by his side, than she could have flown ; she could only sit motionless, hoping that he would not misunderstand her strange behaviour, and feeling as though, with all her pain, it was joy to be hearing his voice again.

It was lulling her into a reverie when coffee was brought in, and Leigh said something about calling Barbara, and wondering what she was doing with herself.

" If you will allow me, I will take her a cup, she is in the inner room," returned Norman. He had seen her all the time then—what a goose he must think her ; and Bab struggled up in her arm-chair, and pushed back her hair from her face with a troubled expression ; but it was too late to escape his attention, for he was coming in now, not groping about in the dusky

light as though the room was strange to him, but walking straight up to her.

"I have brought you your coffee, Barbara," and then he sat down silently beside her till she had finished it.

"I am afraid you are tired," he observed presently, as she gave up the empty cup to him, with a muttered thanks.

"Very tired—oh, very tired," was poor Bab's answer.

"I thought so, that is why I did not talk to you to-night. If I were you, I would retire early; why should you not go now, your sister will excuse you; a good sleep will set you right after your journey, and I will come and see you to-morrow."

"See me?" Barbara could hardly believe her ears; her tone of surprise made him laugh.

"Yes; why should I not? I want to hear all the Sunningford news, and about your father and Connie; and then I have to seek a little information at your hands. I believe there is a matter of property belonging to me at Heathcote House—a mere trifle, I know—but still mine by right."

"Property of yours, Norman?"

"Yes, certainly; there, we will not talk about it to-night, it may raise some vexed question. I will come and see you to-morrow afternoon. I am such an old friend, that your sister, Mrs. Leigh, will understand."

"Of course she will understand; but, Norman——"

"No—no but to-night," he returned good-humouredly; "we will leave them all for to-morrow. You are not looking well, Barbara, you are too thin; good-night, my child, good-night."

It might have been the kindly-uttered my child, the pleasant shake of the hand, or the thought that she should see him to-morrow, that made Barbara's heart beat so joyfully; and it was a long time before she could reason herself into quiet again, by the assurance which, alas! she grew to believe, as she repeated it, that never, and under no circumstances whatever could he be Bab's friend again.

CHAPTER XLII.

BAB HAS THE LAST WORD.

"O when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd,
 She was a vixen, when she went to school,
 And, though she be but little, she is fierce."

SHAKSPEARE.

"Will you leave me here?
 So wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsold,
 So mere a woman! And I love you so,
 I love you!

Could I see his face,
 I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
 Or did his arms constrain me?

That I know not."

AURORA LEIGH.

BARBARA'S first waking thoughts were rather more hopeful. Before she opened her eyes she had a sensation that something pleasurable was going to happen; with that returned the recollection that Norman was coming again to-day, and now, as she dressed, she told herself that joy predominated.

For might it not be, that after some sort of sober fashion he could still be her friend, or if not now, perhaps after some years had passed; when she was a staid old maid, and he grown grey with his many labours, would it not be as well that she should put by even the remembrance that he had ever been more to her. She would forgive that past hardness of his, nay, she would consider it as altogether cancelled, by her fault; she had behaved foolishly last night, she would meet him on different grounds; those few kindly words in which he had bidden her good-night convinced her that he would be willing to meet her advances half-way, and this afternoon she would so look and speak that he would forget the strange agitation of her manner yesterday.

Roused by these good resolutions, and quite content to anticipate that period of her old maidenism, Bab dressed herself in her sober brown merino, scoffing inwardly at the remembrance of the rose-coloured ribbons, and she had quite a struggle with herself not to feel pleased at seeing how well the warm rich colour suited her. "If people only knew how to dress in

accordance with their age," thought Bab with something of her old complacency, "we should have no ridiculous Miss Vokes's. Miss Vokes must be sixty at least, and wears primrose bonnets and green gloves, and I am only five-and-twenty and dress in brown; Leigh will call me 'the little nun' again, but I can't help it;" and then she went downstairs feeling positively virtuous.

It seems a little thing to relate, but that dress supported her through the day; there is certainly a degree of stability and strength to be attained in dress. One remembers what the grand old Vicar of Wakefield said about his daughters on the subject: "A suit of mourning has transferred my coquette into a prude, and a new set of ribbons has given her younger sister more than natural vivacity." What a wonderful observer of human nature that old vicar must have been. It was just so with Barbara; the brown dress unadorned with ribbons, and her new resolution as to the treatment of Dr. Strath, so fortified her, that she was enabled to pass the long morning quite tranquilly with Ruth and her boys; she was quite affecting in her attentions to baby Leigh. I want Boy to be very fond of his aunt," she observed quite placidly; "for there's no knowing how much I may have to do with him; I mean to save up all my money for Boy, in case Leigh gets bankrupt—merchants are generally bankrupt, are they not?"

Nay, she even received with tolerable equanimity the news that Ruth had business in the City that afternoon, and must leave Barbara to entertain Dr. Strath by herself. "Be sure you ask him to dinner, dear," she repeated for the fourth time; "Leigh won't like me to be inhospitable to his old friends, and those hotels are so dreary."

"Of course I will ask him to dinner if you wish it," replied Barbara coolly, "and you need not make any excuse about leaving me alone, for we are such old friends you know, and I am to tell him all the Sunningford news." And then she established herself in the warm sunny little drawing-room, and began to knit a pair of socks for Boy. She felt a little less brave when she heard the bell ring, and dropped some stitches from her hand suddenly trembling; perhaps picking them up made her face burn, she was certainly too busy to look up at Dr. Strath's entrance, and gave him her hand and her knitting-needles together, in a confusion quite unworthy of her brown dress, all the more that Dr. Strath took no sort of notice of

the fire to-day, but looked straight at her with a full understanding that she was flurried.

"I am glad to find you alone this afternoon," he said, dragging the opposite chair farther on the hearth, most unnecessarily as Bab thought, till she remembered that they had a right now to chat cosily over the fire. "The maid told me her mistress was out, and I was rather relieved, as I thought I would speak to you on a painful subject which I am anxious to get settled."

"Do you mean about that property?" asked Barbara, wrinkling her brow terribly over her knitting.

"Yes, that and some other things which we will come to directly. Barbara, do you know that poor Lady Strath is dead?"

Barbara laid down her knitting, and turned paler than he had yet seen her.

"Oh, Norman!"

"Yes; is it not sad, poor woman? I am afraid that there was no love lost between us, in her lifetime; but I think her bitterest enemy would have pardoned her, knowing what she suffered!"

Barbara leaned her head on her hand with a sad questioning look, too shocked to speak.

"She was in New York when I saw her. I am not going to harass you with particulars, Barbara, but it was a most fearful disease of which she died; her sufferings were protracted and intense, and nothing could be done to relieve her. I was called in at the last to consult on the case; and it will always be a comfort to me to remember that I was able to do more than the others to alleviate her last hours."

"Oh Norman! were you with her when she died?"

"Yes, poor thing, and I am thankful to say that there was something like peace at the end; she asked my forgiveness, and my mother's too! for the bitterness she had always shown towards us. Just before her last attack she mentioned your name; and asked if I had received Nigel's letter?"

"What letter?" asked Barbara, and then her eyes dropped before the keenness of his look.

"That is what I am going to ask you; now you know what property of mine is in your possession. By and by I shall want to hear your reasons for detaining it these three years; at present I am only anxious that you should at once restore it to me."

"I cannot!" she replied, and her face was suffused with a sudden burning blush.

"What? you do not mean you have destroyed it!" he exclaimed, and his look was very stern.

"No, oh no!" she faltered, but she would have given worlds that that sin had been hers; "still, all the same, I cannot give it to you."

"Why not?" he inquired still more harshly; "is it at Heathcote House?"

"No, but——"

"Is it here?" he demanded in the peremptory tone she knew so well.

"Yes, it is here! but, indeed, Norman, I cannot give it to you!"

Then he rose from his seat and walked straight up to her.

"Barbara, I insist on having that letter."

She remained silent; she was gathering all her strength to answer him.

"Come, this is childish," he continued; "how long have you thought it right to detain other people's property? The whole thing is absurd; the letter is mine, and you know it. I have a right to insist. Barbara, I am sorry to have to speak so firmly, but I must ask you to fetch it at once."

But she made no sort of movement.

"Barbara, do you hear me? did you ever know me go from my word? I will see that letter."

"You shall never see it, Norman."

"Barbara!"

"I have a right to say so," she went on, growing utterly white in her agitation; "you ought never to have known of its existence. It is not a letter at all, it is a mere fragment, just a word or two, relating to a conversation between us, and in which he has most certainly betrayed my confidence."

"He was the best judge of that, poor fellow."

"No, he was not; I deny it. He was so generous and so ready to act on impulse, he ought never to have written what he did; but it was all his kindness. Now you know why I feel that those few poor little words really belong to me."

"I cannot say that I am at all convinced by your reasoning, Barbara."

"Oh, but you must be. Should I have kept it from you all these years if I had not felt that it was my right so to

detain it? Norman, you used to be my friend ; for the sake of the dear old days, never speak to me on this subject again. I ask it as the greatest favour you could ever do me."

He took her hand, not caring to hide from her that her words touched him.

"It will be the only favour that I have ever refused you, dear child."

"But you will not, you will not refuse me, Norman?"

"Most emphatically I must, Barbara ; it is no use wasting any more words over it, I say again that I insist on seeing that letter."

Then she sat absolutely dumb before him.

"Come, Barbara, delay cannot save you."

"You will see it?"

"Certainly I will."

"Then take the consequences, for all friendship will be over between us, and I will never willingly see your face again." So saying she walked slowly, almost rigidly, to the centre table, and unlocked a handsome writing case, one of Nigel's many presents to her. Norman followed, and stood watching her as she touched the spring of a secret drawer, where a curl of fair hair lay side by side with the worn paper.

She gave it him without a word—her will, strong as it was, had been almost as nothing compared to his and Nigel's—and then she took up her station at the window that she might not see him read it. She was raging with wounded pride and a sense of injury ; she had quite meant those last bitter words she had said to him ; if he could refuse her this she would never forgive him, he had humiliated her so that she would never willingly see his face again. An evil mood was on Barbara ; now indeed for the first time it might be said that she was hardening her heart against him. He was standing opposite to her when he began the letter, but as he went on he turned his back, and read it leaning with his elbow on the mantelpiece ; there might have been the silence of minutes or hours before he put it down, and came towards her with a flash in his eyes that made her tremble, it was so joyful and triumphant.

"Is this true what he says, Barbara?—but of course it is true ; and you have hidden from me these three years, these three miserable years, that you loved me. Was that kind, was that generous, Barbara?"

"I suppose I must endure your triumph."

"What do you mean by that? nay, I will have you look at me, Barbara; is this a time to turn from me when, for the first time in my life, I dare to tell you openly that I love you?"

"It is too late for that now, Dr. Strath." But as she spoke her neck and even her little ears grew scarlet.

"Why is it too late, and why do you call me Dr. Strath? I suppose you mean to be wilful and punish me for my silence. But what I have suffered, what we have both suffered——" but she made no reply to him.

"I do not think that any man had more to contend with than I; if I rail against my fate it will be forgiven me, all those years that I wooed happiness, and she never came to me. Barbara, when I think of our last meeting, our parting rather, when you came to me in your velvet gown, decked in your lover's gifts, and looking, oh so lovely, to my eyes, I wonder I did not snatch you up in my arms, and refuse to give you up, such longing was upon me, and you thought me so cold and hard."

"Ah, and were you not?" she said, still averting her face from him.

"Cold, ask fire if it be cold, for molten fire was in my veins I fully believe; no, you will never know what I suffered, for I have no words in which to tell you; some men can die and make no sign."

Then she turned upon him suddenly.

"If this be true, why did you leave me?" she asked.

"Can you not guess—but no, of course you cannot; did it never strike you that I left England for my cousin's sake?" and, as he saw her inconceivable astonishment, "did not my mother tell you how I was to blame for Nigel's accident, and the morbid effect it had on my mind?"

"Of course she did, but——"

"Well it seems Quixotic and absurd to you, perhaps it does to me now; but there was a time when I would have laid down my life to ensure his happiness, and then I made that vow; by and by when I found he was fretting his heart out for you, I learnt there were harder things to lay down than one's life."

"Is this why you went to America?"

"Yes, and because my poverty made me despair of ever marrying you."

"And you deliberately left me to be wooed by Nigel?"

"Of course I did, I could not stay and look on."

"Oh, no wonder he called you a madman when he found it out; did it never occur to you that I might have a voice in the matter?"

"I thought you would be more likely to accept him if I gave him a chance; I did not think my claims were likely to prevail over a younger and handsomer man; if, at any time, I fancied you had a preference for me I thought it was a mere girl's fancy, because you had seen no one else and I was kind to you."

"A mere girl's fancy! oh it was like your man's wisdom; no, don't speak to me, I cannot bear it. Who would have thought that you could have treated me so ungenerously?"

"My dearest, hush."

"No, I am not your dearest, not yours nor any other man's—you are all alike, all; you could do this grand thing for him, and never dream that your self-sacrifice involved mine also; when you told me you could never marry, did you not render me dumb before you, was I not as helpless and tongue-tied as ever you could wish me to be?"

"I wish you—oh, Barbara!"

"Well, can girls tell their love? Should I not have interfered with your fine plan for making yourself miserable? you want me to praise this generous deed of yours, but I will not. I told you then, that I did not think you right to leave Sunningford, you were turning your back on those poor people; because they were ignorant, and slandered you, you were hard upon them, and so you went away with a slur on your name, instead of living it down, and that's what I call cowardly, Norman."

"Very cowardly if I had left only for that reason, Barbara."

"Ah, but you were just as mistaken in the other thing. You took the trouble to be kind to me, and win my heart, and then you treated it as a girl's fancy, and left me to Nigel. Do you know now to what you left me, and how he made me do the wrong I hated, for my father's sake?"

"My noble Barbara!"

"No, it was not noble, it was a lie, and I hate lies; I glossed it over to myself by thinking that I loved him a little, and might love him more, and that it could not be wrong to save a father's life; but how all those months I despised myself, seeing myself so decked out and caressed."

"Hush, dear! it is over now."

"What does it matter that it is over? Norman, what sin there was lies at your door, for you won my heart, and left me to be tempted as he tempted me, oh my poor St. Ronans."

"Have you finished, dear child?"

"No, I have not finished, and because you have not humiliated me enough, you must make me show you that letter, and now all friendship must be over between us."

"I believe it must, Barbara."

"Of course it must; do you think——" but then she broke down.

His only answer was to open his arms, and fold her tightly to his breast, waiting silently till her pride and passion had sobbed themselves out; for some minutes, poor child, she hardly knew what had happened to her, till his few soothing words, and, above all, his tender caresses restored her to herself—now indeed that weary little head was at rest on his broad breast, and the hand that she loved above everything was wiping away the tears from her wet face.

"Oh, Norman! I have been very naughty, can you ever forgive me?"

His answer was eloquent enough.

"He has given you to me, Barbara," he said after a little while, "and it shall not be my fault if the gift is not soon in my keeping."

"A poor gift, Norman."

"No, rich, and made priceless by my love. I must not be selfish in my happiness," he continued; "Barbara, I shall never ask you to leave your father—not for always, I mean."

They were sitting side by side when he said this, and she stole her little hand into his with a look of mute inquiry.

"I have had so many changes in my life, that one more will not signify. What do you say, my dear child, if I take a London practice, so that you may be near your father and Leigh?"

"London is a long way from Sunningford, Norman."

"Yes, but nearer than New York. Perhaps in a few years we may get the doctor to give up work and settle near us. I am sure that with two such sons, such a scheme would be practicable.

Barbara smiled gratefully in his face

"Yes; but, Norman, I could not bear you to incur such loss."

"You mean about selling my practice, oh that is nothing. Lisle will be glad to take it of me, and, like my mother, I am growing heartily sick of New York ; you see I have made money enough by that fortunate fluke of mine to establish me in any West-end practice, and, without boasting, I think I may say that I am sure of getting on in any place I may choose."

"Dear Norman, I am so glad !"

"Well, so am I for your sake. I want Barbara to queen it grandly as my wife, and in her velvet dress too—poor Nigel. After all, there must be some witchery in your dark eyes, my beauty."

"Oh, Norman, I am not that."

"Not that, what are you then, something better, eh ?"

"No," with a sweet upward glance, "only Bab."

THE END.



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Carey, Rosa Nouchette
Barbara Heathcote's
trial

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